

The Haunted Cabin

by Thornton W. Burgess

“What's on this afternoon?”

“Nothin' much.”

“Come on, push it out! If it's nothin' much the sooner it's out of your system the better.”

“Well, what's the matter with a visit to the haunted cabin? I guess we can get a permit all right.”

The speakers were Hal Harrison and Walter. They had just met after noon mess, and the proposal to visit the haunted cabin came from Hal.

“Great idea,” exclaimed Walter. “There's Chief Avery over there now! You tackle him while I hunt up Woodhull. I'm pretty sure he'll let me go.”

Permission was readily granted, and the two boys at once launched a canoe, and pointing the bow up and across the lake soon left the camp behind. The haunted cabin was the same to [289] which Walter had heard veiled allusions on his first day in camp, and to which he supposed he had been carried for his initiation ordeal. Ever since then he had intended to visit it, but until now there had never seemed a good opportunity. It was located on the other side of the lake some three miles up, and was a half mile back from the water some little distance off to one side of a lumber trail. As it was out of bounds, it was necessary to get permission from the chiefs in order to visit it.

“What do you know about it, Walter?” asked Hal as they sent their light craft swiftly over the water.

“Not much except that there was a murder or a fight or somethin' of the kind there years ago. Do you know anything about it?”

“Only the stories that are floatin' 'round, and no two agree,” replied Hal. “I've been kind of interested, and have run down all the stories I could get hold of. I guess there was a tragedy there all right, but from all I can gather it was a fair fight, and not a cold-blooded crime. The story that seems to be most generally accepted is that there was a fight over a girl. The cabin was built by an old half-breed trapper before there were any lumber trails through these parts at all, and he lived there with his daughter, who was said to be a mighty pretty girl. The old fellow's name was Duquesne, but he was more Indian than French, and was commonly called Indian Joe. He was a grouchy old fellow, and people didn't have any more to do with him than they had to.

“The girl was a beauty, and old Joe was so jealous of her that he never would let her out of his sight when they came down to the village to trade, and the young fellows of the region found that the vicinity of old Joe's cabin was anything but healthy. Finally a young Scotchman named Bruce moved down here from Canada and ran a line of traps up in the region that Joe had come to consider his own special preserve. This was bad enough, and roused all the Indian in him, but when he discovered that young Bruce had fallen in love with the girl and that she was in love with him his rage knew no bounds and he made a lot of ugly threats, so that the friends of the young fellow warned him to keep away from

the cabin, and I guess the girl begged him to also.

“But Bruce was hot-headed and afraid of nothing and no one. When he heard of the threats he rightly guessed that things were probably mighty uncomfortable for the girl, so he jumps into a canoe and heads straight for the cabin. When he got there old Joe was out on his trap line and the girl begged Bruce to leave. But he wouldn’t, and waited till the old man came back. He was in the cabin when the old man returned and the latter got inside before he discovered the visitor. He started to throw his rifle up, but Bruce was too quick for him and knocked it out of his hands. But the old man had a knife, and he didn’t waste any time. He was all Indian then, and was on Bruce like a wildcat.

“I guess Bruce saw it was kill or be killed, with the girl for the stakes, so he whips out his own knife, and they turned that cabin into a shambles.

“The young Scotchman had the advantage of weight and youth, but Joe was all Indian, with every trick known to that kind of fighting, and with black hate in his heart. I guess it was some fight, all right, and the girl seeing the whole thing. Finally Bruce got in a lucky thrust that ended things and old Joe with it. He was cut up something fierce himself and so weak from loss of blood that I guess he thought he was going to cash in. But the girl managed to bind him up and get him into the canoe, though how she did it no one knows, for the cabin is half a mile back from the lake. Anyway, the first the village knew of it she came paddling in with Bruce in the bottom of the canoe, more dead than alive.

“You know lumbermen and backwoods people are awfully superstitious, and it wasn’t long before they had the cabin haunted by Indian Joe’s spirit, moaning for his lost daughter. Hunters and trappers began to tell all sorts of stories of queer sounds around the cabin and soon no one would go near the old place. Superstition’s a queer thing, isn’t it?”

“You bet it is, and it isn’t confined to lumbermen and backwoods people by a long shot!” replied Walter. “What became of the girl?”

“Oh, Bruce recovered, of course, and married her, and they moved up into Canada. There’s the landing at the lumber trail.”

A few minutes later they drew the canoe out on the shore. A lumberman’s batteau was drawn up at one side, and they could hear voices ahead of them on the trail.

“A party going up to the Brown camp, I guess. I understand they’ve begun cutting about three miles back,” said Walter.

The boys set out at a brisk pace along the trail. “Avery says that the trail to the cabin is so overgrown that it’s hard to find, but that there is a Scout sign where it turns off of this trail, and then a line of old blazes,” said Hal. “It’s on the right a short half mile from the lake.”

The boys slackened their pace, scanning the right hand side of the trail as they advanced. Presently Walter stopped and pointed to a little group of stones half hidden in the brush to the right. It consisted of a stone of fair size with a smaller one resting on top of it and a third on the ground to the right of the others. Both boys recognized it as the old Indian sign which means “Trail to the right.”

Turning in they soon found a tree with a blaze so old that it was nearly covered with bark.

Getting the direction from this they were able to sight the next blaze and so pick out the trail.

“Doesn’t look as if any one had been over this for an age,” said Hal as they carefully picked their way along.

In about fifteen minutes they saw an opening in the tree tops ahead and soon stepped out into what had once been a small clearing, but which was now overgrown with brush and berry thickets, and in places good stands of second growth birch and maple. In the midst of this dreary waste stood the “haunted cabin.”

The boys stood at a little distance and looked at it in silence for a few minutes, thinking of the tragedy which was said to have been enacted there. It was the usual type of log cabin, a one room affair with the remnants of a shed or small addition of some kind clinging to the rear. The cabin had been well built, for it was in a good state of preservation save that in places the roof had fallen, leaving black, yawning holes. It had been turfed at some time in its existence, and such parts as were intact were covered with a tangle of grass and weeds. Altogether it was a desolate and dreary looking object.

“Gee, I don’t wonder they think it’s haunted! Well, let’s see what it looks like inside,” said Walter.

They approached it from the front, and to their great surprise found the door still intact and closed. When they attempted to open it they were further mystified to find that it would not yield to their combined efforts. It was locked on the inside.

“What do you know about that!” exclaimed Hal. “Let’s try the back door.”

Here a further surprise awaited them, for their entrance was as effectually barred as before. They stared at each other blankly.

“Wouldn’t that get your goat!” muttered Walter. “Must be that some hunters have had nerve enough to use it, and have locked it up for safe keeping,” he added with a half-hearted laugh. His eyes idly taking in the surroundings suddenly became fixed on a point a few feet distant. “Say, Hal,” said he abruptly, “there’s a path, and it looks to me as if it had been used lately. Let’s follow it.”

It certainly was a path, and with every evidence that it had been recently used. The boys followed it in puzzled silence until it abruptly terminated at a spring. It required no very keen observation to see that the spring had been cleaned out at no very distant day. As by a common impulse they turned and stared back at the cabin, which returned the stare with its gaping windows, as empty of life and forlorn in appearance as could well be imagined. And yet there was something sinister about the old ruin. It lay like a wet blanket on the buoyant spirit of adventure with which they had entered the clearing.

Walter gave a little embarrassed laugh as he said, “It’s queer, but I’ve had a feeling of being watched ever since we struck the clearing. There’s no reason for it, and yet I can’t get rid of the idea that somebody’s eyes are on us.”

“Must be the ‘hant,’” said Hal with a laugh. But his face sobered as he added, “I’ve had an awfully uncomfortable feeling myself, Walt. I don’t believe I’m keen to crawl in one of those windows. Reckon I’ve seen all I want to of the old place. What do you say if we go back?”

"I've had enough," agreed Walter. "I don't wonder they call the old thing haunted. Guess that story got on our nerves all right. I never thought I was superstitious, but I sure would hate to spend a night here."

The boys quickened their pace as they passed the ruin, throwing a hasty glance in at the yawning windows, but in the darkness of the interior they could make out little.

"Ugh!" said Hal as they picked up the trail out, "I'm glad to leave the blamed old place. I guess it's haunted all right!"

Had he looked back and seen the venom in the pair of black eyes that, through one of the windows they had so recently passed, watched them disappear on the trail, he would have still further rejoiced that they were leaving the old ruin behind.

They found the canoe where they had left it, but the batteau was gone. With Hal in the stern and Walter in the bow they soon had half a mile of open water between them and the shore. It was then that Hal noticed for the first time that there was considerable water in the canoe and that it was increasing rapidly. His exclamation of dismay drew Walter's attention to their predicament. The canoe had not leaked before—what did it mean?

A hasty examination of the interior showed that the water was coming in slightly forward of Walter's seat, and that at the rate it was gaining their little craft would soon be awash. There was nothing wherewith to bail except their hands or sneaks, and these were wholly inadequate in face of the fact that one must paddle. They did not dare go back whence they had come, for instinctively they felt that the source of their present difficulty lay there. Camp was still some two and a half miles distant and the afternoon was growing late. It was a situation to test their powers of resource and scoutcraft to the fullest.

Walter hurriedly stripped off his trousers and shirt. "What are you going to do?" cried Hal. "You can't swim from here to camp!"

"Don't intend to," responded Walter hurriedly. "I'm goin' to try to find out what's happened to us. When I get out you get as far back on the stern as you can. That will put her bow clear out of water and give me a chance to see a good half of her bottom."

With the words he plunged over, and Hal crawled back as directed. Walter came up at once under the bow and found that, as he had anticipated, he could examine easily the whole forward half of the canoe's bottom. It took but a moment to locate the trouble, two long gashes close to and parallel with the keel.

"Some one's cut it!" cried Walter. "Must be one of those lumber-jacks that was over there with the batteau did it. Never knew of them doing anything like this before. They've played tricks on the fellows lots of times for fun, but never anything low down mean like this, or anything that meant danger. You stay back there and paddle a while, Hal, and I'll swim. With her bow out that way she can't leak any more. By and by you can swim and I'll paddle. Water's fine!" he added with a grin.

The water had rushed to the stern and Hal, sitting astride the canoe, was able to bail much of it out with one of Walter's sneaks. Then while Walter swam he slowly paddled so as to remain close to

the swimmer. The wind had begun to freshen a trifle and as they were heading it came from a point off the port quarter, and Hal soon had his hands full to keep on the course at all, for the high bow was caught by every little gust and frequently he was spun around as if on a pivot.

Walter was swimming easily, but he realized that the distance to be covered was beyond his powers, and he thought rapidly as he swam. Hal was not a strong swimmer, but would be able to cover a short distance while he had a breathing spell in the canoe. Gradually he came to a realization of the struggle his comrade was having with the canoe, and that the latter's arms would be strained and weary when it came his turn to take to the water. They must try some other plan. Studying the lines of the canoe he concluded that with both of them far back in the stern the gashes would be partly out of water, and that with both paddling they might make some distance before the water reached the danger point. Then he could go overboard again and Hal could bail out as before.

This plan was at once tried and with both putting all their strength to the paddles they gained a full mile before it became necessary for Walter to go overboard again. This time they were near a small island, and thither Hal drove the canoe and had beached and emptied it by the time Walter arrived. After a thorough rest they prepared to start again, when they spied a boat coming down the lake. One look was sufficient to assure them that their troubles were at an end. There was but one pair of shoulders in the woods like those sending the light craft toward them with powerful strokes.

"Jim! Jim! Oh, you Jim!" they yelled shrilly.

The rower stopped and turned toward them, then altered his course, and in a few minutes was resting on his oars alongshore while, both talking at once, they poured out their story and showed him the gashed canoe. The big fellow's face wore a look of perplexity as, with the boys in his boat and the canoe in tow, he headed for camp.

"Whar did ye say ye went when ye left th' canoe?" he asked.

"Up to the haunted cabin," replied Walter.

"Was the hant t' hum?" he inquired with a grin.

"No," said Hal, "or if he was he was mighty seclusive. Both doors were locked."

"What's thet ye said, son?" demanded the guide sharply, as he stopped rowing for a minute.

"I said the doors were locked and we couldn't get in," replied Hal.

"And there was a path down to the spring that looked as if some one had been using it," added Walter.

"Prob'ly some lumberman been in thar fer a drink," said the guide with an assumption of carelessness, and then lapsed into such a state of abstraction that the boys gave up trying to interest him further. He came out of it as they approached the camp.

"Don't say nothin' 'bout this; jes' leave it t' me," he advised. "I'll explain it t' th' doctor. 'Tain't like th' boys o' th' lumber camps t' do no sech trick as this, and I'd hate t' hev any feelin' stirred up. You boys jes' keep mum."

The boys were quite willing to do so, and bidding them a hasty farewell Jim strode off toward headquarters.

“Queer thing, the whole business,” mused Walter as they watched the guide disappear in the office. “I wonder what Jim’s got on his mind.”

And he would have wondered still more if he could have heard the guide exclaim, as he banged his big fist down on the desk at the end of a fifteen minutes’ talk with the doctor:

“It’s him as sure as shootin’! We’ll git him this time, or my name ain’t Jim Everly!”

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. “The Haunted Cabin.” *The Boy Scouts of Woodcraft Camp*. Philadelphia: The Peen Publishing Company, 1922. 288 – 303. Electronic.