Ichabod Crane is a newcomer to the Hudson Valley; unlike the generations of Dutch settlers that have preceded him, he has neither the strength nor the means to become a farmer and landowner. His single marketable skill is teaching, and in the isolated hamlet of Sleepy Hollow this pays meager rewards. His schoolhouse is decrepit, one large room constructed of logs; its broken windows have been patched with the leaves of old copybooks. Ichabod’s quarters are whatever rooms the neighboring Dutch farmers who board him for a week at a time are willing to provide. Ichabod thus makes the rounds of the neighborhood, and his small salary, combined with his constantly changing address, allows him to store all of his personal possessions in a cotton handkerchief.

Because he comes from Connecticut, a state whose major product is country schoolmasters, Ichabod feels both superior to the old Dutch stock of the valley and frustrated by his perpetual state of poverty. He compensates for the former by regularly caning the more obstinate of his little charges and for the latter by doing light work on the neighboring farms. He further supplements his income by serving as the local singing master, instructing the farm children in the singing of psalms. Never missing a chance to curry favor with the local mothers, Ichabod always pets the youngest children “like the lion bold” holding the lamb. In short, his single goal is self-advancement, and though he has merely “tarried” in Sleepy Hollow, he clearly will remain if his prospects improve.

Ichabod cannot rely on his looks or strength to advance him, so he cultivates a circle of farmers’ daughters, particularly those from the more prosperous families, and impresses them with his erudition and vastly superior tastes. He has, indeed, “read several books quite through,” among them Cotton Mather’s account of witchcraft in New England. He believes even the strangest of these tales; indeed, he frightens himself so much when he reads them that he is startled when he hears a bird or sees a firefly. He is, in other words, completely naïve and suggestible. The local tale of the Galloping Hessian who rides headless through the woods of Sleepy Hollow particularly alarms him. A snow-covered bush in the half-light is enough to convince Ichabod that he has seen the headless horseman.
One of Ichabod’s music students is Katrina Van Tassel, the eighteen-year-old daughter of a prosperous Dutch farmer. She is “plump as a partridge; ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father’s peaches.” She also, as her father’s only daughter, has “vast expectations.” Though she is also something of a coquette, the prospect of her inheritance makes her seem to Ichabod a desirable bride, and he determines to win her.

Ichabod’s mouth waters when he contemplates the fruits of old Baltus Van Tassel’s land. He dreams of the fat meadowlands, the rich wheat fields, and the rye, buckwheat, fruit, and Indian corn that will be his if he can win Katrina’s hand. Once married to Katrina, he could invest in large tracts of land. He can even imagine Katrina with a whole family of children, setting out with him for promising new territories in Kentucky or Tennessee. It is, however, the sumptuous comfort of the Van Tassel home that makes him realize that he must have Katrina.

Winning Katrina, however, presents a problem in the person of her rugged, rough-edged Dutch boyfriend, Abraham Brunt, nicknamed “Brom Bones” because of his Herculean size and strength. Brom, who has long considered Katrina his, immediately recognizes Ichabod as his rival, and with his gang of roughriders plays a series of practical jokes on the Yankee schoolmaster. However, his pranks—stopping up the singing-school chimney, upsetting the schoolhouse, even training his dog to whine whenever Ichabod sings—do little to thwart the progress that Ichabod believes he is making in his campaign to win Katrina’s hand. Indeed, Ichabod is encouraged when he receives an invitation to a “quilting frolic” at the Van Tassel home.

Ichabod spends extra time dressing and even borrows a horse so that he can arrive in style. The horse, somewhat inappropriately named Gunpowder, is as gaunt and shabby as Ichabod, but this does not prevent him from thinking that Katrina will be impressed. Ichabod continues to imagine the Van Tassel wealth that he will have if he can make Katrina his, and he quickly becomes the center of attention when Katrina dances with him. Brom, meanwhile, looks on with helpless jealousy. Brom enjoys himself only when telling of his close encounter with the headless horseman. Ichabod counters with extracts from Cotton Mather and stories of his own close calls with Connecticut and local ghosts.
An interview between Ichabod and Katrina follows the party, and Ichabod leaves, crestfallen. Could Katrina merely have been trying to make Brom jealous? Ichabod’s anger, frustration, and sudden obliviousness to the rich Van Tassel lands seem to answer this question.

The midnight quiet of the countryside, the gathering clouds, and the ghost stories that Ichabod has heard do not improve Ichabod’s mood. Indeed, he becomes increasingly uneasy as he approaches the tree from which Major Andre had been hanged. Ichabod knows that he will be safe if only he can cross the church bridge, but just then the goblin rider appears on his black horse, closing in fast behind him. Instead of disappearing in a burst of fire and brimstone as he has always been said to do, the rider throws his head at Ichabod. It strikes Ichabod’s own cranium, and the rider passes on like a whirlwind.

Though Ichabod’s borrowed horse reappears the next morning, Ichabod does not. The executor of his estate, Hans Van Ripper, burns Ichabod’s copy of Cotton Mather and the scrawled fragments of a few love poems to Katrina. Ichabod himself becomes part of Sleepy Hollow’s folklore. Some say that he was snatched by the Galloping Hessian, but others say that Ichabod is still alive, that he was afraid to return from fear of the goblin and Hans Van Ripper (from whom he had borrowed the horse) and was mortified by Katrina’s refusal. Brom Bones appears soon after such discussions, always wearing a knowing smile whenever the goblin’s pumpkin head is mentioned.

Near Tarrytown on the Hudson River is a little valley populated by Dutch folk that seems to be the quietest place in the world. A drowsy influence hangs over the place and people so that the region is known as Sleepy Hollow, and the lads who live there are called Sleepy Hollow boys. Some say that the valley is bewitched.

A schoolteacher named Ichabod Crane arrives in the valley, looking like a scarecrow because of his long, skinny frame and his snipelike nose. As is customary, Crane circulates among the homes in Sleepy Hollow, boarding with the parents of each of his pupils for one week at a time. Fortunately for him, the valley’s larders are full and the tables groan with food, for the schoolmaster has a wonderful appetite. He is always welcome in the country homes because in small ways he has contrived to make himself useful to the farmers. He takes care to
appear to be patient with the children, and he loves to spend the long winter nights with the families of his pupils, exchanging tales of ghosts and haunted places, while ruddy apples roast on the hearths.

The main figure said to haunt Sleepy Hollow is a man on horseback without a head. The villagers speculate that the specter is the apparition of a Hessian horseman who lost his head to a cannonball; whatever it may be, the figure is often seen in the countryside during the gloomy winter nights. The specter is known to all as the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow.

A fan of the writings of Salem Witch Trial chronicler Cotton Mather and a believer in ghosts, haunts, and spirits of all description, Ichabod is often filled with fear as he walks home after an evening of storytelling. His only source of courage at those times is his loud and nasal voice, which makes the night resound with many a sung psalm.

The schoolteacher picks up a little extra money by holding singing classes. One student who captures his fancy is the plump and rosy-cheeked Katrina Van Tassel. She is the only child of a very substantial farmer, a fact that contributes to her charms for the ever-hungry Ichabod. Since she is not only beautiful but also lively, she is a great favorite among the lads in the neighborhood.

Abraham Van Brunt—Brom for short—is Katrina’s favorite squire. Known for his tall and powerful frame, the locals have taken to calling him Brom Bones. A lively lad with a fine sense of humor and a tremendous amount of energy, Brom scares away Katrina’s other suitors. Brom Bones is a formidable rival for the gaunt and shaggy Ichabod. Brom would like to carry their battle over Katrina into the open, but the schoolteacher knows better than to tangle with him physically. Brom can do little more than play practical jokes on the lanky Ichabod.

One fall evening, the whole countryside is invited to a quilting frolic at Mynheer Van Tassel’s farm. Ichabod borrows a horse for the occasion from his current host. The horse, called Gunpowder, is as gaunt as Ichabod himself but still possesses a spark of spirit. The two of them are a sight as they trot happily to the party. Everything Ichabod sees on the Van Tassel farm pleases him. He revels in the pretty picture painted by fields full of shocks of corn and pumpkins, granaries stuffed with grain, and meadows and barn lots filled with sleek cattle and plump
fowl. The farm is clearly the most prosperous holding for miles around. Ichabod thinks that, upon winning the hand of Katrina, he could perhaps sell the farm and, with the proceeds, move farther west.

The party is merry and exciting, punctuated by grand feasts and lively dances. Ichabod is enraptured by the cakes, pies, meats, and tea. He joins in the dancing, feeling himself to be at his best when he dances with Katrina. Later, he listens to the men exchange Sleepy Hollow ghost stories on the porch. As the evening wanes and the others leave, he tarries in an attempt to pay court to Katrina. Before long, however, he leaves the Van Tassels crestfallen at his lack of success and starts home on the gaunt Gunpowder. As he rides along in the darkness, all the evening’s stories of ghosts return to haunt Ichabod, and he becomes even more dismal. In the darkness, he thinks he sees dim shapes and hears soft moans.

When Ichabod finally approaches the bridge over Wiley’s Swamp, his horse Gunpowder balks and will not respond to Ichabod’s urgent commands; then, across the marsh, through the dark evening, Ichabod sees something huge and misshapen. He calls out to the figure, which refuses to answer him. Ichabod’s hair stands straight on end, and he keeps to the road, thinking it must be too late to turn back. The strange figure keeps pace with him, whether he goes fast or slow, and before long Ichabod believes the dark shape to be a headless horseman holding his head on the pommel of his saddle. Ichabod soon loses his nerve and whips Gunpowder to a gallop; as they rush down the dark road, his saddle loosens and he nearly loses his grip, but he hugs the horse around the neck. He is so scared that he cannot even muster the courage to sing a psalm.

When Ichabod reaches the church bridge, where by tradition the headless specter should disappear in a flash of fire and brimstone, he hears the horseman close upon him. As he turns to look, the spirit seems to throw his head at the schoolmaster. Ichabod tries to dodge, but the head bursts against his skull and tumbles him from his mount. In the morning, a shattered pumpkin is found near the bridge. Gunpowder is found grazing at the farmer’s gate nearby. Ichabod, however, is never seen in Sleepy Hollow again, although later reports are heard that he has relocated. In the valley, they say that Brom Bones, long after marrying Katrina, laughs heartily whenever the story is told of the Headless Horseman.