



J. K. ROWLING

THE ICKABOG



With illustrations by the winners of
The Ickabog Illustration Competition



LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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About the Author

Copyright

The Ickabog is dedicated to:

Mackenzie Jean,
whose favourite story it always was
and who urged me for a decade to write it up properly;

Megan Barnes
and
Patrick Barnes,
in everlasting memory of
Lisa Cheesecake and the Llama;

and, of course, to two wonderful Daisies,
Daisy Goodwin
and
Daisy Murray,
proud daughters of the QSC

Foreword

The idea for *The Ickabog* came to me a long time ago. The word 'Ickabog' derives from 'Ichabod', meaning 'no glory' or 'the glory has departed'. I think you'll understand why I chose the name once you've read the story, which deals with themes that have always interested me. What do the monsters we conjure tell us about ourselves? What must happen for evil to get a grip on a person, or on a country, and what does it take to defeat it? Why do people choose to believe lies even on scant or non-existent evidence?

The Ickabog was written in fits and starts between *Harry Potter* books. The story never underwent any serious modifications. It always started with poor Mrs Dovetail's death and it always ended... well, I won't say how, in case you're coming to it for the first time!

I read the story aloud to my two youngest children when they were very small, but I never finished it, much to the frustration of Mackenzie, whose favourite story it was. After I finished the *Harry Potter* books, I took a five-year break and when I decided not to publish a children's book next, *The Ickabog* went up into the attic, still unfinished. There it stayed for over a decade, and there it would probably be still if the COVID-19 pandemic hadn't happened

and millions of children hadn't been stuck at home, unable to attend school or meet their friends. That's when I had the idea of putting the story online for free and asking children to illustrate it.

Down from the attic came the very dusty box of typed and handwritten papers, and I set to work. My now teenagers, who'd been *The Ickabog's* very first audience, sat and listened to a nightly chapter once I'd nearly finished. Every now and then they'd ask why I'd cut something they used to like, and naturally, I reinstated everything they missed, astounded by how much they remembered.

In addition to my very supportive family, I want to thank those who helped me bring *The Ickabog* online in such a short space of time: my editors Arthur Levine and Ruth Alltimes, James McKnight of the Blair Partnership, my management team, Rebecca Salt, Nicky Stonehill and Mark Hutchinson and my agent, Neil Blair. It really was a herculean effort by all concerned, and I couldn't be more grateful. I'd also like to thank every single child (and the occasional adult!) who submitted pictures for the illustration competition. Looking through the artwork has been a joy and I know I'm far from alone in marvelling at the talent on display. I'd love to think *The Ickabog* gave some future artists and illustrators their first public exposure.

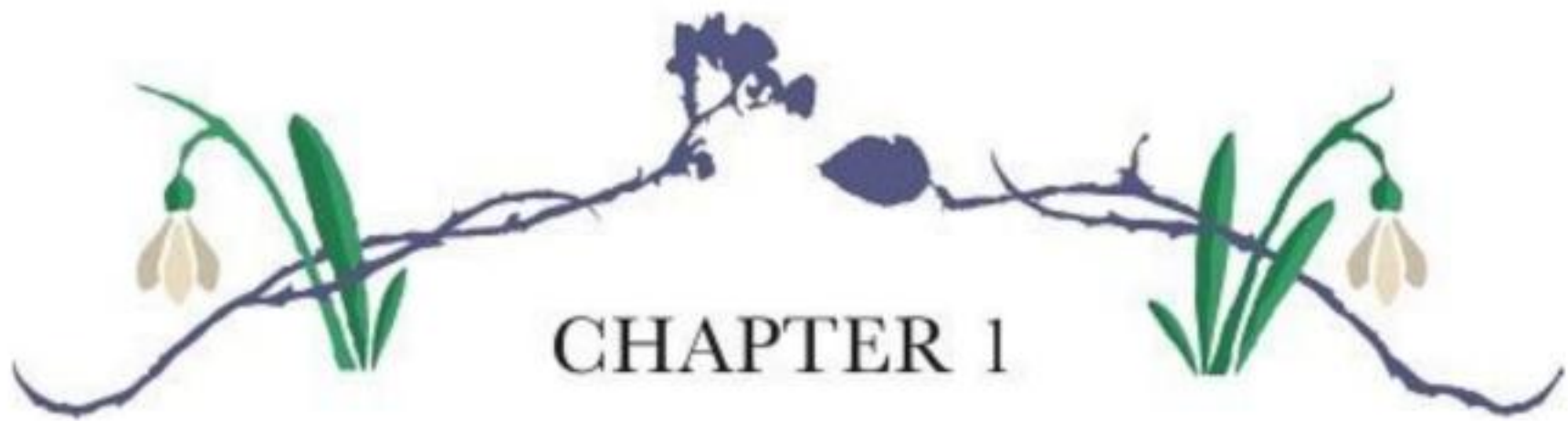
Returning to the land of Cornucopia and finishing what I started so long ago has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my writing life. All that remains to say is that I hope you enjoy reading

the story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JKR', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

J.K. Rowling

July 2020



King Fred the Fearless

Once upon a time, there was a tiny country called Cornucopia, which had been ruled for centuries by a long line of fair-haired kings. The king at the time of which I write was called King Fred the Fearless. He'd announced the 'Fearless' bit himself, on the morning of his coronation, partly because it sounded nice with 'Fred', but also because he'd once managed to catch and kill a wasp all by himself, if you didn't count five footmen and the boot boy.

King Fred the Fearless came to the throne on a huge wave of popularity. He had lovely yellow curls, fine sweeping moustaches, and looked magnificent in the tight breeches, velvet doublets, and ruffled shirts that rich men wore at the time. Fred was said to be generous, smiled and waved whenever anyone caught sight of him, and looked awfully handsome in the portraits that were distributed throughout the kingdom, to be hung in town halls. The people of Cornucopia were most happy with their new king, and

many thought he'd end up being even better at the job than his father, Richard the Righteous, whose teeth (though nobody had liked to mention it at the time) were rather crooked.

King Fred was secretly relieved to find out how easy it was to rule Cornucopia. In fact, the country seemed to run itself. Nearly everybody had lots of food, the merchants made pots of gold, and Fred's advisors took care of any little problem that arose. All that was left for Fred to do was beam at his subjects whenever he went out in his carriage and go hunting five times a week with his two best friends, Lord Spittleworth and Lord Flapoon.

Spittleworth and Flapoon had large estates of their own in the country, but they found it much cheaper and more amusing to live at the palace with the king, eating his food, hunting his stags, and making sure that the king didn't get too fond of any of the beautiful ladies at court. They had no wish to see Fred married, because a queen might spoil all their fun. For a time, Fred had seemed to rather like Lady Eslanda, who was as dark and beautiful as Fred was fair and handsome, but Spittleworth had persuaded Fred that she was far too serious and bookish for the country to love her as queen. Fred didn't know that Lord Spittleworth had a grudge against Lady Eslanda. He'd once asked her to marry *him*, but she'd turned him down.

Lord Spittleworth was very thin, cunning, and clever. His friend Flapoon was ruddy-faced, and so enormous that it required six men to heave him onto his massive chestnut horse. Though not as clever as Spittleworth, Flapoon was still far sharper than the king.

Both lords were expert at flattery, and pretending to be

astonished by how good Fred was at everything from riding to tiddlywinks. If Spittleworth had a particular talent, it was persuading the king to do things that suited Spittleworth, and if Flapoon had a gift, it was for convincing the king that nobody on earth was as loyal to the king as his two best friends.

Fred thought Spittleworth and Flapoon were jolly good chaps. They urged him to hold fancy parties, elaborate picnics, and sumptuous banquets, because Cornucopia was famous, far beyond its borders, for its food. Each of its cities was known for a different kind, and each was the very best in the world.

The capital of Cornucopia, Chouxville, lay in the south of the country, and was surrounded by acres of orchards, fields of shimmering golden wheat, and emerald-green grass, on which pure white dairy cows grazed. The cream, flour, and fruit produced by the farmers here was then given to the exceptional bakers of Chouxville, who made pastries.

Think, if you please, of the most delicious cake or biscuit you have ever tasted. Well, let me tell you they'd have been downright ashamed to serve that in Chouxville. Unless a grown man's eyes filled with tears of pleasure as he bit into a Chouxville pastry, it was deemed a failure and never made again. The bakery windows of Chouxville were piled high with delicacies such as Maidens' Dreams, Fairies' Cradles, and, most famous of all, Hopes-of-Heaven, which were so exquisitely, painfully delicious that they were saved for special occasions and everybody cried for joy as they ate them. King Porfirio, of neighbouring Pluritania, had already sent King Fred a letter, offering him the choice of any of his daughters'

hands in marriage in exchange for a lifetime's supply of Hopes-of-Heaven, but Spittleworth had advised Fred to laugh in the Pluritanian ambassador's face.

'His daughters are nowhere *near* pretty enough to exchange for Hopes-of-Heaven, sire!' said Spittleworth.

To the north of Chouxville lay more green fields and clear, sparkling rivers, where jet-black cows and happy pink pigs were raised. These in turn served the twin cities of Kurdsburg and Baronstown, which were separated from each other by an arching stone bridge over the main river of Cornucopia, the Fluma, where brightly coloured barges bore goods from one end of the kingdom to another.

Kurdsburg was famous for its cheeses: huge white wheels, dense orange cannonballs, big crumbly blue-veined barrels, and little baby cream cheeses smoother than velvet.

Baronstown was celebrated for its smoked and honey-roasted hams, its sides of bacon, its spicy sausages, its melting beefsteaks, and its venison pies.

The savoury fumes rising from the chimneys of the red-brick Baronstown stoves mingled with the odorous tang wafting from the doorways of the Kurdsburg cheesemongers, and for forty miles all around, it was impossible not to salivate breathing in the delicious air.

A few hours north of Kurdsburg and Baronstown, you came upon acres of vineyards bearing grapes as large as eggs, each of them ripe and sweet and juicy. Journey onwards for the rest of the day and you reached the granite city of Jeroboam, famous for its

wines. They said of the Jeroboam air that you could get tipsy simply walking its streets. The best vintages changed hands for thousands upon thousands of gold coins, and the Jeroboam wine merchants were some of the richest men in the kingdom.

But a little north of Jeroboam, a strange thing happened. It was as though the magically rich land of Cornucopia had exhausted itself by producing the best grass, the best fruit, and the best wheat in the world. Right at the northern tip came the place known as the Marshlands, and the only things that grew there were some tasteless, rubbery mushrooms and thin dry grass, only good enough to feed a few mangy sheep.

The Marshlanders who tended the sheep didn't have the sleek, well-rounded, well-dressed appearance of the citizens of Jeroboam, Baronstown, Kurdsburg, or Chouxville. They were gaunt and ragged. Their poorly nourished sheep never fetched very good prices, either in Cornucopia or abroad, so very few Marshlanders ever got to taste the delights of Cornucopian wine, cheese, beef, or pastries. The most common dish in the Marshlands was a greasy mutton broth, made of those sheep who were too old to sell.

The rest of Cornucopia found the Marshlanders an odd bunch – surly, dirty, and ill-tempered. They had rough voices, which the other Cornucopians imitated, making them sound like hoarse old sheep. Jokes were made about their manners and their simplicity. As far as the rest of Cornucopia was concerned, the only memorable thing that had ever come out of the Marshlands was the legend of the Ickabog.





His friend Flapoon was ruddy-faced, and so enormous that it required six men to heave him onto his massive chestnut horse.

By Sophie, age 11 years, New Zealand



CHAPTER 2

The Ickabog

The legend of the Ickabog had been passed down by generations of Marshlanders, and spread by word of mouth all the way to Chouxville. Nowadays, everybody knew the story. Naturally, as with all legends, it changed a little depending on who was telling it. However, every story agreed that a monster lived at the very northernmost tip of the country, in a wide patch of dark and often misty marsh too dangerous for humans to enter. The monster was said to eat children and sheep. Sometimes it even carried off grown men and women who strayed too close to the marsh at night.

The habits and appearance of the Ickabog changed depending on who was describing it. Some made it snake-like, others dragonish or wolf-like. Some said it roared, others that it hissed, and still others said that it drifted as silently as the mists that descended on the marsh without warning.

The Ickabog, they said, had extraordinary powers. It could imitate the human voice to lure travellers into its clutches. If you tried to kill it, it would mend magically, or else split into two Ickabogs; it could fly, spurt fire, shoot poison – the Ickabog’s powers were as great as the imagination of the teller.

‘Mind you don’t leave the garden while I’m working,’ parents all over the kingdom would tell their children, ‘or the Ickabog will catch you and eat you all up!’ And throughout the land, boys and girls played at fighting the Ickabog, tried to frighten each other with the tale of the Ickabog, and even, if the story became too convincing, had nightmares about the Ickabog.

Bert Beamish was one such little boy. When a family called the Dovetails came over for dinner one night, Mr Dovetail entertained everybody with what he claimed was the latest news of the Ickabog. That night, five-year-old Bert woke, sobbing and terrified, from a dream in which the monster’s huge white eyes were gleaming at him across a foggy marsh into which he was slowly sinking.

‘There, there,’ whispered his mother, who’d tiptoed into his room with a candle and now rocked him backwards and forwards in her lap. ‘There is no Ickabog, Bertie. It’s just a silly story.’

‘B-but Mr Dovetail said sheep have g-gone missing!’ hiccoughed Bert.

‘So they have,’ said Mrs Beamish, ‘but not because a monster took them. Sheep are foolish creatures. They wander off and get lost in the marsh.’

‘B-but Mr Dovetail said p-people disappear too!’

‘Only people who’re silly enough to stray onto the marsh at night,’ said Mrs Beamish. ‘Hush now, Bertie, there is no monster.’

‘But Mr D-Dovetail said p-people heard voices outside their windows and in the m-morning their chickens were gone!’

Mrs Beamish couldn’t help but laugh.

‘The voices they heard are ordinary thieves, Bertie. Up in the Marshlands they pilfer from each other all the time. It’s easier to blame the Ickabog than to admit their neighbours are stealing from them!’

‘Stealing?’ gasped Bert, sitting up in his mother’s lap and gazing at her with solemn eyes. ‘Stealing’s very naughty, isn’t it, Mummy?’

‘It’s very naughty indeed,’ said Mrs Beamish, lifting up Bert, placing him tenderly back into his warm bed and tucking him in. ‘But luckily, we don’t live near those lawless Marshlanders.’

She picked up her candle and tiptoed back towards the bedroom door.

‘Night, night,’ she whispered from the doorway. She’d normally have added, ‘Don’t let the Ickabog bite,’ which was what parents across Cornucopia said to their children at bedtime, but instead she said, ‘Sleep tight.’

Bert fell asleep again, and saw no more monsters in his dreams.

It so happened that Mr Dovetail and Mrs Beamish were great friends. They’d been in the same class at school, and had known each other all their lives. When Mr Dovetail heard that he’d given Bert nightmares, he felt guilty. As he was the best carpenter in all of Chouxville, he decided to carve the little boy an Ickabog. It had a

wide, smiling mouth full of teeth and big, clawed feet, and at once it became Bert's favourite toy.

If Bert, or his parents, or the Dovetails next door, or anybody else in the whole kingdom of Cornucopia had been told that terrible troubles were about to engulf Cornucopia, all because of the myth of the Ickabog, they'd have laughed. They lived in the happiest kingdom in the world. What harm could the Ickabog do?





Death of a Seamstress

The Beamish and Dovetail families both lived in a place called the City-Within-The-City. This was the part of Chouxville where all the people who worked for King Fred had houses. Gardeners, cooks, tailors, pageboys, seamstresses, stonemasons, grooms, carpenters, footmen, and maids: all of them occupied neat little cottages just outside the palace grounds.

The City-Within-The-City was separated from the rest of Chouxville by a high white wall, and the gates in the wall stood open during the day, so that the residents could visit friends and family in the rest of Chouxville, and go to the markets. By night, the sturdy gates were closed, and everyone in the City-Within-The-City slept, like the king, under the protection of the Royal Guard.

Major Beamish, Bert's father, was head of the Royal Guard. A handsome, cheerful man who rode a steel-grey horse, he accompanied King Fred, Lord Spittleworth, and Lord Flapoon on

*image
not
available*

Before Fred went to bed that night, Herringbone knocked on his bedroom door. After bowing deeply, the Chief Advisor asked whether the king was intending to send flowers to Mrs Dovetail's funeral.

'Oh – oh, yes!' said Fred, startled. 'Yes, send a big wreath, you know, saying how sorry I am and so forth. You can arrange that, can't you, Herringbone?'

'Certainly, sire,' said the Chief Advisor. 'And – if I may ask – are you planning to visit the seamstress's family, at all? They live, you know, just a short walk from the palace gates.'

'Visit them?' said the king pensively. 'Oh, no, Herringbone, I don't think I'd like – I mean to say, I'm sure they aren't expecting that.'

Herringbone and the king looked at each other for a few seconds, then the Chief Advisor bowed and left the room.

Now, as King Fred was used to everyone telling him what a marvellous chap he was, he really didn't like the frown with which the Chief Advisor had left. He now began to feel cross rather than ashamed.

'It's a bally pity,' he told his reflection, turning back to the mirror in which he'd been combing his moustaches before bed, 'but after all, I'm the king and she was a seamstress. If *I* died, I wouldn't have expected *her* to—'

But then it occurred to him that if he died, he'd expect the whole of Cornucopia to stop whatever they were doing, dress all in black and weep for a week, just as they'd done for his father, Richard the Righteous.

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the Royal Guard to go hunting. As usual, everyone along his route came rushing out into their gardens to bow, curtsy, and cheer. As the king bowed and waved back, he noticed that the front garden of one cottage remained empty. It had black drapes at the windows and the front door.

‘Who lives there?’ he asked Major Beamish.

‘That – that’s the Dovetail house, Your Majesty,’ said Beamish.

‘Dovetail, Dovetail,’ said the king, frowning. ‘I’ve heard that name, haven’t I?’

‘Er... yes, sire,’ said Major Beamish. ‘Mr Dovetail is Your Majesty’s carpenter and Mrs Dovetail is – was – Your Majesty’s Head Seamstress.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said King Fred hurriedly, ‘I – I remember.’

And spurring his milk-white charger into a canter, he rode swiftly past the black-draped windows of the Dovetail cottage, trying to think of nothing but the day’s hunting that lay ahead.

But every time the king rode out after that, he couldn’t help but fix his eyes on the empty garden and the black-draped door of the Dovetail residence, and every time he saw the cottage, the image of the dead seamstress clutching that amethyst button came back to him. Finally, he could bear it no longer, and summoned the Chief Advisor to him.

‘Herringbone,’ he said, not looking the old man in the eye, ‘there’s a house on the corner, on the way to the park. Rather a nice cottage. Large-ish garden.’

‘The Dovetail house, Your Majesty?’

‘Oh, that’s who lives there, is it?’ said King Fred airily. ‘Well, it

‘Yes,’ said Major Beamish, ‘I’m sure he does.’

Like his wife, Major Beamish wanted to think the best of the king, because he, his father, and his grandfather before him had all served loyally in the Royal Guard. So even though Major Beamish observed that King Fred seemed quite cheerful after Mrs Dovetail’s death, hunting as regularly as ever, and though Major Beamish knew that the Dovetails had been moved out of their old house to live down by the graveyard, he tried to believe that the king was sorry for what had happened to his seamstress, and that he’d had no hand in moving her husband and daughter.

The Dovetails’ new cottage was a gloomy place. Sunlight was blocked out by the high yew trees that bordered the graveyard, although Daisy’s bedroom window gave her a clear view of her mother’s grave, through a gap between dark branches. As she no longer lived next door to Bert, Daisy saw less of him in her free time, although Bert went to visit Daisy as often as possible. There was much less room to play in her new garden, but they adjusted their games to fit.

What Mr Dovetail thought about his new house, or the king, nobody knew. He never discussed these matters with his fellow servants, but went quietly about his work, earning the money he needed to support his daughter and raising Daisy as best he could without her mother.

Daisy, who liked helping her father in his carpenter’s workshop, had always been happiest in overalls. She was the kind of person who didn’t mind getting dirty and she wasn’t very interested in clothes. Yet in the days following the funeral, she

father wiped away his tears in the evenings, thinking Daisy wasn't looking? 'Silly', when to talk to her mother she had to visit a cold white headstone?

Daisy drew back her hand, and smacked Bert right around the face.

Then the oldest Roach brother, whose name was Roderick and who now lived in Daisy's old bedroom, shouted, 'Don't let her get away with it, Butterball!' and led all the boys in shouts of 'Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!'

Terrified, Bert gave Daisy's shoulder a half-hearted shove, and it seemed to Daisy that the only thing to do was to launch herself at Bert, and everything became dust and elbows until suddenly the two children were pulled apart by Bert's father, Major Beamish, who'd come running out of the palace on hearing the commotion, to find out what was going on.

'Dreadful behaviour,' muttered Lord Spittleworth, walking past the major and the two sobbing, struggling children.

But as he turned away, a broad smirk spread over Lord Spittleworth's face. He was a man who knew how to turn a situation to good use, and he thought he might have found a way to banish children – or some of them, anyway – from the palace courtyard.

But King Fred was amused rather than disturbed.

‘Oh, I believe scuffles among children are quite usual, Spittleworth.’

Spittleworth and Flapoon exchanged looks behind the king’s back, and Spittleworth tried again.

‘Your Majesty is, as ever, the very soul of kindness,’ said Spittleworth.

‘Of course, some kings,’ Flapoon muttered, brushing crumbs off the front of his waistcoat, ‘if they’d heard that a child spoke of the crown so disrespectfully...’

‘What’s that?’ exclaimed Fred, the smile fading from his face. ‘A child spoke of me... disrespectfully?’ Fred couldn’t believe it. He was used to the children shrieking with excitement when he bowed to them from the balcony.

‘I believe so, Your Majesty,’ said Spittleworth, examining his fingernails, ‘but, as I mentioned... it was Major Beamish who separated the children... he has all the details.’

The candles sputtered a little in their silver sticks.

‘Children... say all manner of things, in fun,’ said King Fred. ‘Doubtless the child meant no harm.’

‘Sounded like bally treason to me,’ grunted Flapoon.

‘But,’ said Spittleworth swiftly, ‘it is Major Beamish who knows the details. Flapoon and I may, perhaps, have misheard.’

Fred sipped his wine. At that moment, a footman entered the room to remove the pudding plates.

‘Cankerby,’ said King Fred, for such was the footman’s name, ‘fetch Major Beamish here.’



CHAPTER 8

The Day of Petition

Selfish, vain, and cruel. Selfish, vain, and cruel.

The words echoed in the king's head as he pulled on his silk nightcap. It couldn't be true, could it? It took Fred a long time to fall asleep, and when he woke in the morning he felt, if anything, worse.

He decided he wanted to do something kind, and the first thing that occurred to him was to reward Beamish's son, who'd defended him against that nasty little girl. So he took a small medallion that usually hung around the neck of his favourite hunting dog, asked a maid to thread ribbon through it, and summoned the Beamishes to the palace. Bert, whom his mother had pulled out of class and hurriedly dressed in a blue velvet suit, was struck speechless in the presence of the king, which Fred enjoyed, and he spent several minutes speaking kindly to the boy, while Major and Mrs Beamish nearly burst with pride in their son. Finally, Bert returned to

sacrifice himself for others. Every king of Cornucopia had handed out gold coins and trifling favours on the Day of Petition: Fred wanted to do something so splendid that it would ring down the ages, and you didn't get into the history books by replacing a fruit farmer's favourite hat.

The two lords on either side of Fred were becoming bored. They'd much rather have been left to loll in their bedrooms until lunchtime than sit here listening to peasants talking about their petty troubles. After several hours, the last petitioner passed gratefully out of the Throne Room, and Flapoon, whose stomach had been rumbling for nearly an hour, heaved himself out of his chair with a sigh of relief.

'Lunchtime!' boomed Flapoon, but just as the guards were attempting to close the doors, a kerfuffle was heard, and the doors flew open once more.



‘Sees a what?’ asked King Fred.

‘A marshteazle, sire. Them’s bald rat-like things what lives in the marsh. Not bad in pies if ye don’t mind the tails.’

Flapoon looked queasy.

‘So Patch sees the marshteazle,’ the shepherd continued, ‘and he gives chase. I shouts for Patch and shouts, sire, but he was too busy to come back. And then, sire, I hears a yelp. “Patch!” I cries. “Patch! What’s got ye, lad?” But Patch don’t come back, sire. And then I sees it, through the fog,’ said the shepherd in a low voice. ‘Huge, it is, with eyes like lanterns and a mouth as wide as that there throne, and its wicked teeth shining at me. And I forgets old Patch, sire, and I runs and runs and runs all the way home. And next day I sets off, sire, to come and see ye. The Ickabog ate me dog, sire, and I wants it punished!’

The king looked down at the shepherd for a few seconds. Then, very slowly, he got to his feet.

‘Shepherd,’ said the king, ‘we shall travel north this very day to investigate the matter of the Ickabog once and for all. If any trace of the creature can be found, you may rest assured that it shall be tracked to its lair and punished for its impudence in taking your dog. Now, take these few gold coins and hire yourself a ride back home in a haycart!’

‘My lords,’ said the king, turning to the stunned Spittleworth and Flapoon, ‘pray change into your riding gear and follow me to the stables. There is a new hunt afoot!’

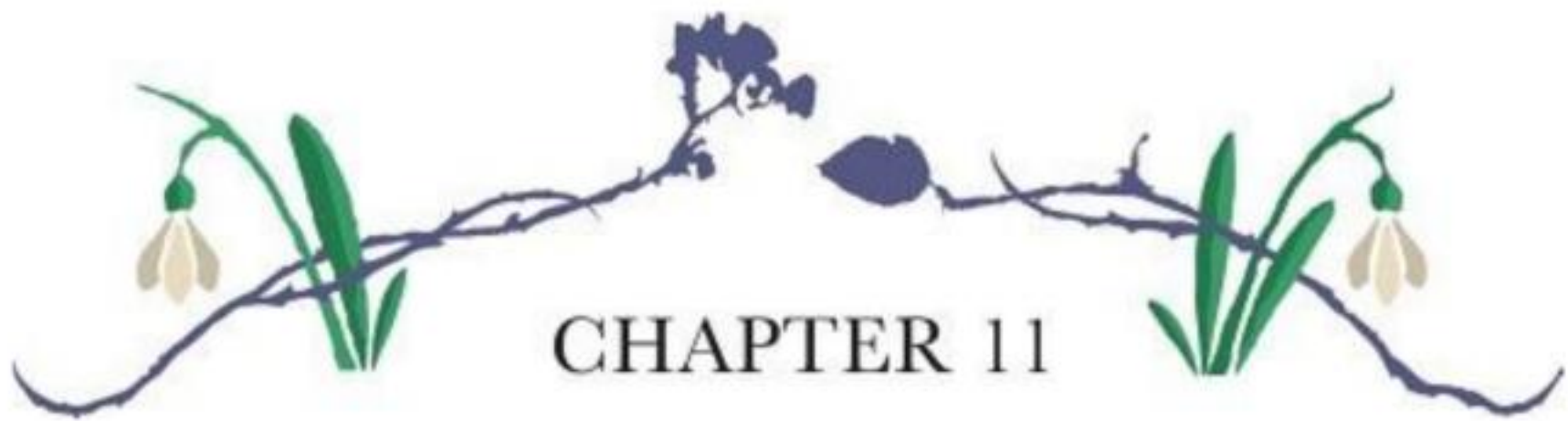
to watch the soldiers assembling.

I shall now tell you a secret, which nobody else knew. Lady Eslanda would never have married the king, even if he'd asked her. You see, she was secretly in love with a man called Captain Goodfellow, who was now chatting and laughing with his good friend Major Beamish in the courtyard below. Lady Eslanda, who was very shy, had never been able to bring herself to talk to Captain Goodfellow, who had no idea that the most beautiful woman at court was in love with him. Both Goodfellow's parents, who were dead, had been cheesemakers from Kurdsburg. Though Goodfellow was both clever and brave, these were the days when no cheesemaker's son would expect to marry a highborn lady.

Meanwhile, all the servants' children were being let out of school early to watch the battle party set off. Mrs Beamish the pastry chef naturally rushed to collect Bert, so that he'd have a good spot to watch his father passing by.

When the palace gates opened at last, and the cavalcade rode out, Bert and Mrs Beamish cheered at the top of their lungs. Nobody had seen battledress for a very long time. How exciting it was, and how fine! The sunlight played upon the golden buttons, silver swords, and the gleaming trumpets of the buglers, and up on the palace balcony, the handkerchiefs of the ladies of the court fluttered in farewell, like doves.

At the front of the procession rode King Fred, on his milk-white charger, holding scarlet reins and waving at the crowds. Right behind him, riding a thin yellow horse and wearing a bored expression, was Spittleworth, and next came Flapoon, furiously



The Journey North

King Fred's spirits rose higher and higher as he rode out of Chouxville and into the countryside. Word of the king's sudden expedition to find the Ickabog had now spread to the farmers who worked the rolling green fields, and they ran with their families to cheer the king, the two lords, and the Royal Guard as they passed.

Not having had any lunch, the king decided to stop in Kurdsburg to eat a late dinner.

'We'll rough it here, chaps, like the soldiers we are!' he cried to his party as they entered the city famed for its cheese. 'And we'll set out again at first light!'

But, of course, there was no question of the king roughing it. Visitors at Kurdsburg's finest inn were thrown out onto the street to make way for him, so Fred slept that night in a brass bed with a duck-down mattress, after a hearty meal of toasted cheese and chocolate fondue. The lords Spittleworth and Flapoon, on the

now and explore the marsh in the morning! As Your Majesty knows, the marsh can be treacherous! Fogs come suddenly here. We'd do best to approach it by daylight!

'Nonsense!' said Fred, who was bouncing up and down in his saddle like an excited schoolboy. 'We can't stop now, when it's in sight, Beamish!'

The king had given his order, so the party rode on until, at last, when the moon had risen and was sliding in and out behind inky clouds, they reached the edge of the marsh. It was the eeriest place any of them had ever seen, wild and empty and desolate. A chilly breeze made the rushes whisper, but otherwise it was dead and silent.

'As you see, sire,' said Lord Spittleworth after a while, 'the ground is very boggy. Sheep and men alike would be sucked under if they wandered out too far. Then, the feeble-minded might take these giant rocks and boulders for monsters in the dark. The rustling of these weeds might even be taken for the hissing of some creature.'

'Yes, true, very true,' said King Fred, but his eyes still roamed over the dark marsh, as though he expected the Ickabog to pop up from behind a rock.

'Shall we pitch camp then, sire?' asked Lord Flapoon, who'd saved some cold pies from Baronstown and was eager for his supper.

'We can't expect to find even an imaginary monster in the dark,' pointed out Spittleworth.

'True, true,' repeated King Fred regretfully. 'Let us – good

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tops of his shining boots. 'Help! Beamish, where are you? I'm sinking!'

There was an immediate clamour of panicked voices and jangling armour. The guards all hurried off in every direction, trying to find the king, bumping into each other and slipping over, but the floundering king's voice drowned out every other.

'I've lost my boots! Why doesn't somebody help me? *Where are you all?*'

The lords Spittleworth and Flapoon were the only two people who'd followed Beamish's advice and remained quite still in the places they'd occupied when the fog had rolled over them. Spittleworth was clutching a fold of Flapoon's ample pantaloons and Flapoon was holding tight to the skirt of Spittleworth's riding coat. Neither of them made the smallest attempt to help Fred, but waited, shivering, for calm to be restored.

'At least if the fool gets swallowed by the bog, we'll be able to go home,' Spittleworth muttered to Flapoon.

The confusion deepened. Several of the Royal Guard had now got stuck in the bog as they tried to find the king. The air was full of squelches, clanks, and shouts. Major Beamish was bellowing in a vain attempt to restore some kind of order, and the king's voice seemed to be receding into the blind night, becoming ever fainter, as though he was blundering away from them.

And then, out of the heart of the darkness, came an awful terror-struck shriek.

'BEAMISH, HELP ME, I CAN SEE THE MONSTER!'

'I'm coming, Your Majesty!' cried Major Beamish. 'Keep