

Chapter 11 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 other hand, were forced to spend the night in a little room over the stables. Both were rather sore after a long day on horseback. You may wonder why that was, if they went hunting five times a week, but the truth was that they generally sneaked off to sit behind a tree after half an hour's hunting, where they ate sandwiches and drank wine until it was time to go back to the palace. Neither was used to spending hours in the saddle, and Spittleworth's bony bottom was already starting to blister.

Early the following morning, the king was brought word by Major Beamish that the citizens of Baronstown were very upset the king had chosen to sleep in Kurdsburg rather than their splendid city. Eager not to dent his popularity, King Fred instructed his party to ride in an enormous circle through the surrounding fields, being cheered by farmers all the way, so that they ended up in Baronstown by nightfall. The delicious smell of sizzling sausages greeted the royal party, and a delighted crowd carrying torches escorted Fred to the best room in the city. There he was served roasted ox and honey ham, and slept in a carved oak bed with a goose-down mattress, while Spittleworth and Flapoon had to share a tiny attic room usually occupied by two maids. By now, Spittleworth's bottom was extremely painful, and he was furious that he'd been forced to ride forty miles in a circle, purely to keep the sausagemakers happy. Flapoon, who'd eaten far too much cheese in Kurdsburg and had consumed three beefsteaks in Baronstown, was awake all night, groaning with indigestion.

Next day, the king and his men set off again, and this time they headed north, soon passing through vineyards from which eager grape pickers emerged to wave Cornucopian flags and receive waves from the jubilant king. Spittleworth was almost crying from pain, in spite of the cushion he'd strapped to his bottom, and Flapoon's belches and moans could be heard even over the clatter of hooves and jingle of bridles.

Upon arrival at Jeroboam that evening, they were greeted by trumpets and the entire city singing the national anthem. Fred feasted on sparkling wine and truffles that night, before retiring to a silken four-poster bed with a swansdown mattress. But Spittleworth and Flapoon were forced to share a room over the inn's kitchen with a pair of soldiers. Drunken Jeroboam dwellers were reeling about in the street, celebrating the presence of the king in their city. Spittleworth spent much of the night sitting in a bucket of ice, and Flapoon, who'd drunk far too much red wine, spent the same period being sick in a second bucket in the corner.

At dawn next morning, the king and his party set out for the Marshlands, after a famous farewell from the citizens of Jeroboam, who saw him on his way with a thunderous popping of corks that made Spittleworth's horse rear and ditch him on the road. Once they'd dusted Spittleworth off and put the cushion back on his bottom, and Fred had stopped laughing, the party proceeded.

Soon they'd left Jeroboam behind, and could hear only birdsong. For the first time in their entire journey, the sides of the road were empty. Gradually, the lush green land gave way to thin, dry grass, crooked trees, and boulders.

'Extraordinary place, isn't it?' the cheerful king shouted back to Spittleworth and Flapoon. 'I'm jolly glad to see these Marshlands at last, aren't you?'

The two lords agreed, but once Fred had turned to face the front again, they made rude gestures and mouthed even ruder names at the back of his head.

At last, the royal party came across a few people, and how the Marshlanders stared! They fell to their knees like the shepherd in the Throne Room, and quite forgot to cheer or clap, but gaped as though they'd never seen anything like the king and the Royal Guard before - which, indeed, they hadn't, because while King Fred had visited all the major cities of Cornucopia after his coronation, nobody had thought it worth his while to visit the faraway Marshlands.

'Simple people, yes, but rather touching, aren't they?' the king called gaily to his men, as some ragged children gasped at the magnificent horses. They'd never seen animals so glossy and well fed in their lives.

'And where are we supposed to stay tonight?' Flapoon muttered to Spittleworth, eyeing the tumbledown stone cottages. 'No taverns here!'

'Well, there's one comfort, at least,' Spittleworth whispered back. 'He'll have to rough it like the rest of us, and we'll see how much he likes it.'

They rode on through the afternoon and at last, as the sun began to sink, they caught sight of the marsh where the Ickabog was supposed to live: a wide stretch of darkness studded with strange rock formations.

'Your Majesty!' called Major Beamish. 'I suggest we set up camp 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 gracious, how foggy it has become!'

And sure enough, as they'd stood looking out across the marsh, a thick white fog had rolled over them so swiftly and silently that none of them had noticed it.

Q1) In paragraph one, what does 'King Fred's spirits rose higher and higher' mean?

Q2) In paragraph two - Why are Lord Spittleworth and Flapoon not used to riding horseback?

Q3) In paragraph Three - Why does the King choose to travel to Baronstown, even though it is not on their way to the marshland?

Q4) Highlight/circle the words or phrases that the author has used to create atmosphere in this paragraph.

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