

Chapter 14 **Lord Spittleworth's Plan**

When the fog cleared at last, it revealed a very different party of men to those who'd arrived at the edge of the marsh an hour earlier.

Quite apart from their shock at the sudden death of Major Beamish, a few of the Royal Guard were confused by the explanation they'd been given. Here were the two lords, the king and the hastily promoted Major Roach, all swearing that they'd come face-to-face with a monster that all but the most foolish had dismissed for years as a fairy tale. Could it really be true that beneath the tightly wrapped cloaks, Beamish's body bore the tooth and claw marks of the Ickabog?

'Are you calling me a liar?' Major Roach growled into the face of a young private.

'Are you calling *the king* a liar?' barked Lord Flapoon.

The private didn't dare question the word of the king, so he shook his head. Captain Goodfellow, who'd been a particular friend of Major Beamish's, said nothing. However, there was such an angry and suspicious look on Goodfellow's face that Roach ordered him to go and pitch the tents on the most solid bit of ground he could find, and be quick about it, because the dangerous fog might yet return.

In spite of the fact that he had a straw mattress, and that blankets were taken from the soldiers to ensure his comfort, King Fred had never spent a more unpleasant night. He was tired, dirty, wet, and, above all, frightened.

'What if the Ickabog comes looking for us, Spittleworth?' the king whispered in the dark. 'What if it tracks us by our scent? It's already had a taste of poor Beamish. What if it comes looking for the rest of the body?'

Spittleworth attempted to soothe the king.

'Do not fear, Your Majesty, Roach has ordered Captain Goodfellow to keep watch outside your tent. Whoever else gets eaten, you will be the last.'

It was too dark for the king to see Spittleworth grinning. Far from wanting to reassure the king, Spittleworth hoped to fan the king's fears. His entire plan rested on a king who not only believed in an Ickabog, but who was scared it might leave the marsh to chase him.

The following morning, the king's party set off back to Jeroboam. Spittleworth had sent a message ahead to tell the Mayor of Jeroboam that there had been a nasty accident at the marsh, so the king didn't want any trumpets or corks greeting him. Thus, when the king's party arrived, the city was silent. Townsfolk pressing their faces to their windows, or peeking around their doors, were shocked to see the king so dirty and miserable, but not nearly as shocked as they were to see a body wrapped in cloaks, tied to Major Beamish's steel-grey horse.

When they reached the inn, Spittleworth took the landlord aside.

'We require some cold, secure place, perhaps a cellar, where we can store a body for the night, and I shall need to keep the key myself.'

'What happened, my lord?' asked the innkeeper, as Roach carried Beamish down the stone steps into the cellar.

'I shall tell you the truth, my good man, seeing as you have looked after us so well, but it must go no further,' said Spittleworth in a low, serious voice. 'The Ickabog is real and has savagely killed one of our men. You understand, I'm sure, why this must not be widely broadcast. There would be instant panic. The king is returning with all speed to the palace, where he and his advisors - myself, of course, included - will begin work at once on a set of measures to secure our country's safety.'

'The Ickabog? Real?' said the landlord, in astonishment and fear.

'Real and vengeful and vicious,' said Spittleworth. 'But, as I say, this must go no further. Widespread alarm will benefit nobody.'

In fact, widespread alarm was precisely what Spittleworth wanted, because it was essential for the next phase of his plan. Just as he'd expected, the landlord waited only until his guests had gone to bed, then rushed to tell his wife, who ran to tell the neighbours, and by the time the king's party set off for Kurdsburg the following morning, they left behind them a city where panic was fermenting as busily as the wine.

Spittleworth sent a message ahead to Kurdsburg, warning the cheesemaking city not to make a fuss of the king either, so it too was dark and silent when the royal party entered its streets. The faces at the windows were already scared. It so happened that a merchant from Jeroboam, with an especially fast horse, had carried the rumour about the Ickabog to Kurdsburg an hour previously.

Once again, Spittleworth requested the use of a cellar for Major Beamish's body, and once again confided to the landlord that the Ickabog had killed one of the king's men. Having seen Beamish's body safely locked up, Spittleworth went upstairs to bed.

He was just rubbing ointment into the blisters on his bottom when he received an urgent summons to go and see the king. Smirking, Spittleworth pulled on his pantaloons, winked at Flapoon, who was enjoying a cheese and pickle sandwich, picked up his candle and proceeded along the corridor to King Fred's room.

The king was huddled in bed wearing his silk nightcap, and as soon as Spittleworth closed the bedroom door, Fred said:

'Spittleworth, I keep hearing whispers about the Ickabog. The stable boys were talking, and even the maid who just passed by my bedroom door. Why is this? How can they know what happened?'

'Alas, Your Majesty,' sighed Spittleworth, 'I'd hoped to conceal the truth from you until we were safely back at the palace, but I should have known that Your Majesty is too shrewd to be fooled. Since we left the marsh, sire, the Ickabog has, as Your Majesty feared, become much more aggressive.'

'Oh, no!' whimpered the king.

'I'm afraid so, sire. But after all, attacking it was bound to make it more dangerous.'

'But who attacked it?' said Fred.

'Why, you did, Your Majesty,' said Spittleworth. 'Roach tells me your sword was embedded in the monster's neck when it ran— I'm sorry, Your Majesty, did you speak?'

The king had, in fact, let out a sort of hum, but after a second or two, he shook his head. He'd considered correcting Spittleworth - he was sure he'd told the story differently - but his horrible experience in the fog sounded much better the way Spittleworth told it now:

that he'd stood his ground and fought the Ickabog, rather than simply dropping his sword and running away.

'But this is awful, Spittleworth,' whispered the king. 'What will become of us all, if the monster has become more ferocious?'

'Never fear, Your Majesty,' said Spittleworth, approaching the king's bed, the candlelight illuminating his long nose and his cruel smile from below. 'I intend to make it my life's work to protect you and the kingdom from the Ickabog.'

'Th-thank you, Spittleworth. You are a true friend,' said the king, deeply moved, and he fumbled to extract a hand from the eiderdown, and clasped that of the cunning lord.

Thursday 2nd July 2020

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Task - Write the letter that was sent by Lord Spittleworth to the Mayor. Can you write in the style of Lord Spittleworth? How do you think he would have written it to show himself in the best light and to cover the truth.....