

## Chapter 15      **The King Returns**

By the time the king set out for Chouxville the following morning, rumours that the Ickabog had killed a man had not only travelled over the bridge into Baronstown, they'd even trickled down to the capital, courtesy of a cluster of cheesemongers, who'd set out before dawn.

However, Chouxville was not only the furthest away from the northern marsh, it also held itself to be far better informed and educated than the other Cornucopian towns, so when the wave of panic reached the capital, it met an upswell of disbelief.

The city's taverns and markets rang with excited arguments. Sceptics laughed at the preposterous idea of the Ickabog existing, while others said that people who'd never been to the Marshlands ought not to pretend to be experts.

The Ickabog rumours had gained a lot of colour as they travelled south. Some people said that the Ickabog had killed three men, others that it had merely torn off somebody's nose.

In the City-Within-The-City, however, discussion was seasoned with a little pinch of anxiety. The wives, children and friends of the Royal Guard were worried about the soldiers, but they reassured each other that if any of the men had been killed, their families would have been informed by messenger. This was the comfort that Mrs Beamish gave Bert, when he came looking for her in the palace kitchens, having been scared by the rumours circulating among the schoolchildren.

'The king would have told us if anything had happened to Daddy,' she told Bert. 'Here, now, I've got you a little treat.'

Mrs Beamish had prepared Hopes-of-Heaven for the king's return, and she now gave one that wasn't quite symmetrical to Bert. He gasped (because he only ever had Hopes-of-Heaven on his birthday), and bit into the little cake. At once, his eyes filled with happy tears, as paradise wafted up through the roof of his mouth and melted all his cares away. He thought excitedly of his father coming home in his smart uniform, and how he, Bert, would be centre of attention at school tomorrow, because he'd know exactly what had happened to the king's men in the faraway Marshlands.

Dusk was settling over Chouxville when at last the king's party rode into view. This time, Spittleworth hadn't sent a messenger to tell people to stay inside. He wanted the king to feel the full force of Chouxville's panic and fear when they saw His Majesty returning to his palace with the body of one of the Royal Guard.

The people of Chouxville saw the drawn, miserable faces of the returning men, and watched in silence as the party approached. Then they spotted the wrapped-up body slung over the steel-grey horse, and gasps spread through the crowd like flames. Up through the narrow cobbled streets of Chouxville the king's party moved, and men removed their hats and women curtsied, and they hardly knew whether they were paying their respects to the king or the dead man.

Daisy Dovetail was one of the first to realise who was missing. Peering between the legs of grown-ups, she recognised Major Beamish's horse. Instantly forgetting that she and Bert hadn't talked to each other since their fight of the previous week, Daisy pulled free of

her father's hand and began to run, forcing her way through the crowds, her brown pigtailed flying. She had to reach Bert before he saw the body on the horse. She had to warn him. But the people were so tightly packed that, fast as Daisy moved, she couldn't keep pace with the horses.

Bert and Mrs Beamish, who were standing outside their cottage in the shadow of the palace walls, knew there was something wrong because of the crowd's gasps. Although Mrs Beamish felt somewhat anxious, she was still sure that she was about to see her handsome husband, because the king would have sent word if he'd been hurt.

So when the procession rounded the corner, Mrs Beamish's eyes slid from face to face, expecting to see the major's. And when she realised that there were no more faces left, the colour drained slowly from her own. Then her gaze fell upon the body strapped to Major Beamish's steel-grey horse, and, still holding Bert's hand, she fainted clean away.

### Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020

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Task - What might the people have been saying about the story that they have heard?  
Write both as a sceptic and a believer!

Sceptic Townsperson (does not believe the story)	Townsperson that believes the story

