

Taken from <https://www.theickabog.com/lady-eslanda/>

Chapter 19 Lady Eslanda

Spittleworth now marched off towards the dungeons. With Herringbone gone, there was nothing to stop him killing the three honest soldiers. He intended to shoot them himself. There would be time enough to invent a story afterwards – possibly he could place their bodies in the vault where the crown jewels were kept, and pretend they'd been trying to steal them.

However, just as Spittleworth put his hand on the door to the dungeons, a quiet voice spoke out of the darkness behind him.

'Good evening, Lord Spittleworth.'

He turned and saw Lady Eslanda, raven-haired and serious, stepping down from a dark spiral staircase.

'You're awake late, my lady,' said Spittleworth, with a bow.

'Yes,' said Lady Eslanda, whose heart was beating very fast. 'I – I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd take a little stroll.'

This was a fib. In fact, Eslanda had been fast asleep in her bed when she was woken by a frantic knocking on her bedroom door. Opening it, she found Hetty standing there: the maid who'd served Spittleworth his wine, and heard his lies about Nobby Buttons.

Hetty had been so curious about what Spittleworth was up to after his story about Nobby Buttons, that she'd crept along to the Guard's Room and, by pressing her ear to the door, heard everything that was going on inside. Hetty ran and hid when the three honest soldiers were dragged away, then sped upstairs to wake Lady Eslanda. She wanted to help the men who were about to be shot. The maid had no idea that Eslanda was secretly in love with Captain Goodfellow. She simply liked Lady Eslanda best of all the ladies at court, and knew her to be kind and clever.

Lady Eslanda hastily pressed some gold into Hetty's hands and advised her to leave the palace that night, because she was afraid the maid now might be in grave danger. Then Lady Eslanda dressed herself with trembling hands, seized a lantern, and hurried down the spiral staircase beside her bedroom. However, before she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard voices. Blowing out her lantern, Eslanda listened as Herringbone gave the order for Captain Goodfellow and his friends to be taken to the dungeons instead of being shot. She'd been hiding on the stairs ever since, because she had a feeling the danger threatening the men might not yet have passed – and here, sure enough, was Lord Spittleworth, heading for the dungeons with a pistol.

'Is the Chief Advisor anywhere about?' Lady Eslanda asked. 'I thought I heard his voice earlier.'

'Herringbone has retired,' said Spittleworth. 'You see standing before you the new Chief Advisor, my lady.'

'Oh, congratulations!' said Eslanda, pretending to be pleased, although she was horrified. 'So it will be you who oversees the trial of the three soldiers in the dungeons, will it?'

'You're very well informed, Lady Eslanda,' said Spittleworth, eyeing her closely. 'How did you know there are three soldiers in the dungeons?'

'I happened to hear Herringbone mention them,' said Lady Eslanda. 'They're well-respected men, it seems. He was saying how important it will be for them to have a fair trial. I know King Fred will agree, because he cares deeply about his own popularity - as he should, for if a king is to be effective, he must be loved.'

Lady Eslanda did a good job of pretending that she was thinking only of the king's popularity, and I think nine out of ten people would have believed her. Unfortunately, Spittleworth heard the tremor in her voice, and suspected that she must be in love with one of these men, to hurry downstairs in the dead of night, in hope of saving their lives.

'I wonder,' he said, watching her closely, 'which of them it is whom you care about so much?'

Lady Eslanda would have stopped herself blushing if she could, but unfortunately, she couldn't.

'I don't think it can be Ogden,' mused Spittleworth, 'because he's a very plain man, and in any case, he already has a wife. Might it be Wagstaff? He's an amusing fellow, but prone to boils. No,' said Lord Spittleworth softly, 'I think it must be handsome Captain Goodfellow who makes you blush, Lady Eslanda. But would you really stoop so low? His parents were cheesemakers, you know.'

'It makes no difference to me whether a man is a cheesemaker or a king, so long as he behaves with honour,' said Eslanda. 'And the king will be dishonoured, if those soldiers are shot without trial, and so I'll tell him, when he wakes.'

Lady Eslanda then turned, trembling, and climbed the spiral staircase. She had no idea whether she'd said enough to save the soldiers' lives, so she spent a sleepless night.

Spittleworth remained standing in the chilly passage until his feet were so cold he could barely feel them. He was trying to decide what to do.

On the one hand, he really did want to get rid of these soldiers, who knew far too much. On the other, he feared Lady Eslanda was right: people would blame the king if the men were shot without trial. Then Fred would be angry at Spittleworth, and might even take the job of Chief Advisor away from him. If that happened, all

