

Chapter 20 Medals for Beamish and Buttons

When King Fred woke next morning and was informed that his Chief Advisor had retired at this critical moment in the country's history, he was furious. It came as a great relief to know that Lord Spittleworth would be taking over, because Fred knew that Spittleworth understood the grave danger facing the kingdom.

Though feeling safer now that he was back in his palace, with its high walls and cannon-mounted turrets, its portcullis and its moat, Fred was unable to shake off the shock of his trip. He stayed shut up in his private apartments, and had all his meals brought to him on golden trays. Instead of going hunting, he paced up and down on his thick carpets, re-living his awful adventure in the north and meeting only his two best friends, who were careful to keep his fears alive.

On the third day after their return from the Marshlands, Spittleworth entered the king's private apartments with a sombre face, and announced that the soldiers who'd been sent back to the marsh to find out what happened to Private Nobby Buttons had discovered nothing but his bloodstained shoes, a single horseshoe and a few well-gnawed bones.

The king turned white and sat down hard on a satin sofa.

'Oh, how dreadful, how dreadful... Private Buttons... Remind me, which one was he?'

'Young man, freckles, only son of a widowed mother,' said Spittleworth. 'The newest recruit to the Royal Guard, and such a promising boy. Tragic, really. And the worst of it is, between Beamish and Buttons, the Ickabog has developed a taste for human flesh - *precisely* as Your Majesty predicted. It is really astonishing, if I may say so, how Your Majesty grasped the danger from the first.'

'B-but what is to be done, Spittleworth? If the monster is hungry for more human prey...'

'Leave it all to me, Your Majesty,' said Spittleworth soothingly. 'I'm Chief Advisor, you know, and I'm at work day and night to keep the kingdom safe.'

'I'm so glad Herringbone appointed you his successor, Spittleworth,' said Fred. 'What would I do without you?'

'Tish, pish, Your Majesty, 'tis an honour to serve so gracious a king.'

'Now, we ought to discuss tomorrow's funerals. We're intending to bury what's left of Buttons next to Major Beamish. It is to be a state occasion, you know, with plenty of pomp and ceremony, and I think it would be a very nice touch if you could

present the Medal for Outstanding Bravery Against the Deadly Ickabog to relatives of the dead men.'

'Oh, is there a medal?' said Fred.

'Certainly there is, sire, and that reminds me - you haven't yet received your own.'

From an inner pocket, Spittleworth pulled out a most gorgeous gold medal, almost as large as a saucer. Embossed upon the medal was a monster with gleaming ruby eyes, which was being fought by a handsome, muscular man wearing a crown. The whole thing was suspended from a scarlet velvet ribbon.

'Mine?' said the king, wide-eyed.

'But of course, sire!' said Spittleworth. 'Did Your Majesty not plunge your sword into the monster's loathsome neck? We all remember it happening, sire!'

King Fred fingered the heavy gold medal. Though he said nothing, he was undergoing a silent struggle.

Fred's honesty had piped up, in a small, clear voice: *It didn't happen like that. You know it didn't. You saw the Ickabog in the fog, you dropped your sword and you ran away. You never stabbed it. You were never near enough!*

But Fred's cowardice blustered louder than his honesty: *You've already agreed with Spittleworth that that's what happened! What a fool you'll look if you admit you ran away!*

And Fred's vanity spoke loudest of all: *After all, I was the one who led the hunt for the Ickabog! I was the one who saw it first! I deserve this medal, and it will stand out beautifully against that black funeral suit.*

So Fred said:

'Yes, Spittleworth, it all happened just as you said. Naturally, one doesn't like to boast.'

'Your Majesty's modesty is legendary,' said Spittleworth, bowing low to hide his smirk.

The following day was declared a national day of mourning in honour of the Ickabog's victims. Crowds lined the streets to watch Major Beamish and Private Buttons' coffins pass on wagons drawn by plumed black horses.

King Fred rode behind the coffins on a jet-black horse, with the Medal for Outstanding Bravery Against the Deadly Ickabog bouncing on his chest and reflecting the sunlight so brightly that it hurt the eyes of the crowd. Behind the king walked Mrs Beamish and Bert, also dressed in black, and behind them came a howling old woman in a ginger wig, who'd been introduced to them as Mrs Buttons, Nobby's mother.

'Oh, my Nobby,' she wailed as she walked. 'Oh, down with the awful Ickabog, who killed my poor Nobby!'

The coffins were lowered into graves and the national anthem was played by the king's buglers. Buttons' coffin was particularly heavy, because it had been filled with bricks. The odd-looking Mrs Buttons wailed and cursed the Ickabog again while ten sweating men lowered her son's coffin into the ground. Mrs Beamish and Bert stood quietly weeping.

Then King Fred called the grieving relatives forward to receive their men's medals. Spittleworth hadn't been prepared to spend as much money on Beamish and the imaginary Buttons as he'd spent on the king, so their medals were made of silver rather than gold. However, it made an affecting ceremony, especially as Mrs Buttons was so overcome that she fell to the ground and kissed the king's boots.

Mrs Beamish and Bert walked home from the funeral and the crowds parted respectfully to let them pass. Only once did Mrs Beamish pause, and that was when her old friend Mr Dovetail stepped out of the crowd to tell her how sorry he was. The two embraced. Daisy wanted to say something to Bert, but the whole crowd was staring, and she couldn't even catch his eye, because he was scowling at his feet. Before she knew it, her father had released Mrs Beamish, and Daisy watched her best friend and his mother walk out of sight.

Once they were back in their cottage, Mrs Beamish threw herself face down on her bed where she sobbed and sobbed. Bert tried to comfort her, but nothing worked, so he took his father's medal into his own bedroom and placed it on the mantelpiece.

Only when he stood back to look at it did he realise that he'd placed his father's medal right beside the wooden Ickabog that Mr Dovetail had carved for him so long ago. Until this moment, Bert hadn't connected the toy Ickabog with the way his father had died.

Now he lifted the wooden model from its shelf, placed it on the floor, picked up a poker, and smashed the toy Ickabog to splinters. Then he picked up the remnants of the shattered toy and threw them into the fire. As he watched the flames leap higher and higher, he vowed that one day, when he was old enough, he'd hunt down the Ickabog, and revenge himself upon the monster that had killed his father.

Friday 10th July

Task 1 - write a diary entry, in role as King Fred, to describe his thoughts and feelings based upon the events within the last few chapters.
