

This extract is taken from <https://www.theickabog.com/lord-spittleworths-problem/>

Chapter 25 Lord Spittleworth's Problem

Unfortunately for Lord Spittleworth, Mr Dovetail wasn't the only person who'd started voicing doubts about the Ickabog.

Cornucopia was growing slowly poorer. The rich merchants had no problem paying their Ickabog taxes. They gave the collectors two ducats a month, then increased the prices on their pastries, cheeses, hams, and wines to pay themselves back. However, two gold ducats a month was increasingly hard to find for the poorer folk, especially with food at the markets more expensive. Meanwhile, up in the Marshlands, children began to grow hollow-cheeked.

Spittleworth, who had spies in every city and village, began hearing word that people wanted to know what their gold was being spent on, and even to demand proof that the monster was still a danger.

Now, people said of the cities of Cornucopia that their inhabitants had different natures: Jeroboamers were supposed to be brawlers and dreamers, the Kurdsburgers peaceful and courteous, while the citizens of Chouxville were often said to be proud, even snooty. But the people of Baronstown were said to be plain speakers and honest dealers, and it was here that the first serious outbreak of disbelief in the Ickabog happened.

A butcher called Tubby Tenderloin called a meeting in the town hall. Tubby was careful not to say he didn't believe in the Ickabog, but he invited everyone at the meeting to sign a petition to the king, asking for evidence that the Ickabog tax was still necessary. As soon as this meeting was over, Spittleworth's spy, who had of course attended the meeting, jumped on his horse and rode south, arriving at the palace by midnight.

Woken by a footman, Spittleworth hurriedly summoned Lord Flapoon and Major Roach from their beds, and the two men joined Spittleworth in his bedroom to hear what the spy had to say. The spy told the story of the treasonous meeting, then unfurled a map on which he'd helpfully circled the houses of the ringleaders, including that of Tubby Tenderloin.

'Excellent work,' growled Roach. 'We'll have all of them arrested for treason and slung in jail. Simple!'

'It isn't simple at all,' said Spittleworth impatiently. 'There were two hundred people at this meeting, and we can't lock up two hundred people! We haven't got room, for one thing, and for another, everyone will just say it proves we can't show the Ickabog's real!'

'Then we'll shoot 'em,' said Flapoon, 'and wrap 'em up like we did Beamish, and leave 'em up by the marsh to be found, and people will think the Ickabog got 'em.'

'Is the Ickabog supposed to have a gun now?' snapped Spittleworth, 'and two hundred cloaks in which to wrap its victims?'

'Well, if you're going to sneer at our plans, my lord,' said Roach, 'why don't you come up with something clever yourself?'

But that was exactly what Spittleworth couldn't do. Cudgel his sneaky brains though he might, he couldn't think of any way to frighten the Cornucopians back into paying their taxes without complaint. What he needed was proof that the Ickabog really existed, but where was he to get it?

Pacing alone in front of his fire, after the others had gone back to bed, Spittleworth heard another tap on his bedroom door.

'What now?' he snapped.

Into the room slid the footman, Cankerby.

'What do you want? Out with it quickly, I'm busy!' said Spittleworth.

'If it pleases Your Lordship,' said Cankerby, 'I 'appened to be passing your room earlier, and I couldn't 'elp 'earing about that there treasonous meeting in Baronstown what you, Lord Flapoon and Major Roach was talking about.'

'Oh, couldn't you *help* it?' said Spittleworth, in a dangerous voice.

'I thought I should tell you, my lord: I've got evidence that there's a man 'ere in the City-Within-The-City what thinks the same way as those traitors in Baronstown,' said Cankerby. 'E wants proof, just like them butchers do. Sounded like treason to me, when I 'eard about it.'

'Well, of course it's treason!' said Spittleworth. 'Who dares say such things, in the very shadow of the palace? Which of the king's servants dares question the king's word?'

'Well... as to that...' said Cankerby, shuffling his feet. 'Some would say that's valuable information, some would—'

'You tell me who it is,' snarled Spittleworth, seizing the footman by the front of his jacket, 'and then I'll see whether you deserve payment! Their name - *give me their name!*

'It's D-D-Dan Dovetail!' said the footman.

'Dovetail... Dovetail... I know that name,' said Spittleworth, releasing the footman, who staggered sideways and fell into an end table. 'Wasn't there a seamstress...?'

'Is wife, sir. She died,' said Cankerby, straightening up.

'Yes,' said Spittleworth slowly. 'He lives in that house by the graveyard, where they never fly a flag and without a single portrait of the king in the windows. How d'you know he's expressed these treasonous views?'

'I 'appened to over'ear Mrs Beamish telling the scullery maid what 'e said,' said Cankerby.

'You *happen* to hear a lot of things, don't you, Cankerby?' commented Spittleworth, feeling in his waistcoat for some gold. 'Very well. Here are ten ducats for you.'

'Thank you very much, my lord,' said the footman, bowing low.

'Wait,' said Spittleworth, as Cankerby turned to go. 'What does he do, this Dovetail?'

What Spittleworth really wanted to know was whether the king would miss Mr Dovetail, if he disappeared.

'Dovetail, my lord? 'E's a carpenter,' said Cankerby, and he bowed himself out of the room.

'A carpenter,' repeated Spittleworth out loud. '*A carpenter...*

And as the door closed on Cankerby, another of Spittleworth's lightning strike ideas hit him, and so amazed was he at his own brilliance, he had to clutch the back of the sofa, because he felt he might topple over.

