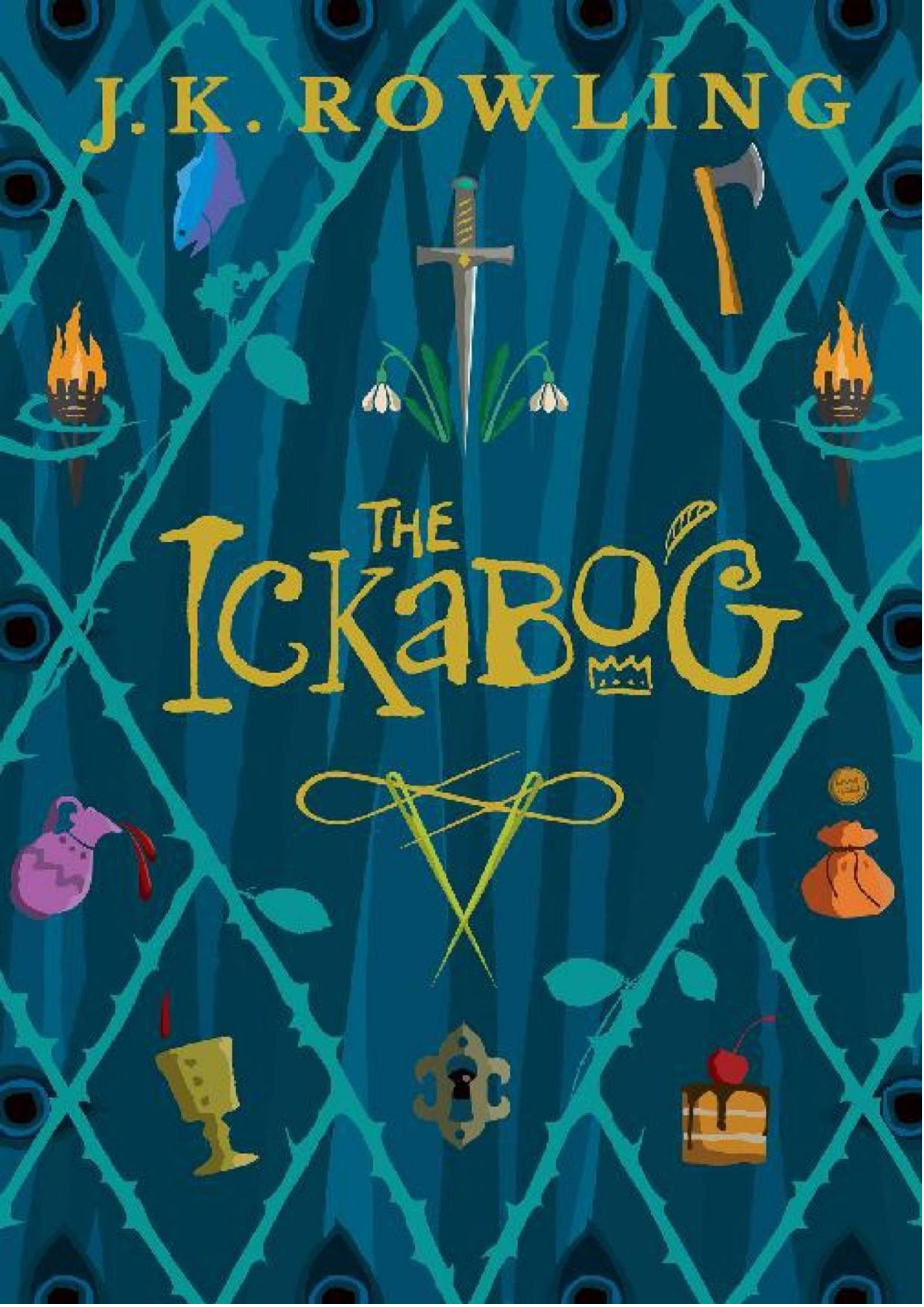


J. K. ROWLING

THE
ICKABOG





J. K. ROWLING

THE
ICKABOG[®]

With Illustrations by the Winners of
The Ickabog Illustration Competition

SCHOLASTIC INC.

The Ickabog is dedicated to:

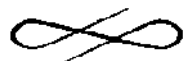
Mackenzie Jean,
whose favorite story it always was and who urged me for a decade to
write
it up properly;

Megan Barnes
and
Patrick Barnes, in
everlasting memory of
Lisa Cheesecake and the Llama;

and, of course, to two wonderful Daisies,
Daisy Goodwin
and
Daisy Murray, proud
daughters of the QSC



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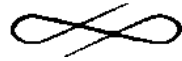
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FOREWORD



The idea for *The Ickabog* came to me a long time ago. The word “Ickabog” derives from “Ichabod,” meaning “no glory” or “the glory has departed.” I think you’ll understand why I chose the name once you’ve read the story, which deals with themes that have always interested me. What do the monsters we conjure tell us about ourselves? What must happen for evil to get a grip on a person, or on a country, and what does it take to defeat it? Why do people choose to believe lies even on scant or nonexistent evidence?

The Ickabog was written in fits and starts between Harry Potter books. The story never underwent any serious modifications. It always started with poor Mrs. Dovetail’s death and it always ended ... Well, I won’t say how, in case you’re coming to it for the first time!

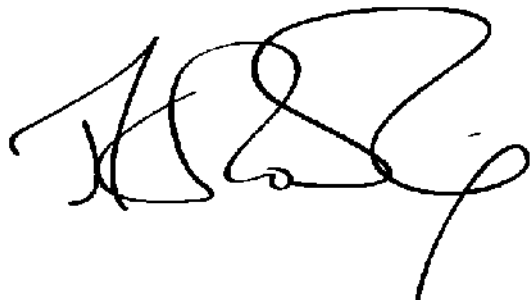
I read the story aloud to my two youngest children when they were very small, but I never finished it, much to the frustration of Mackenzie, whose favorite story it was. After I finished the Harry Potter books, I took a five-year break, and when I decided not to publish a children’s book next, *The Ickabog* went up into the attic, still unfinished. There it stayed for over a decade, and there it would probably be still if the COVID-19 pandemic hadn’t happened and millions of children hadn’t been stuck at home, unable to attend school or meet their friends. That’s when I had the idea of putting the story online for free and asking children to illustrate it.

Down from the attic came the very dusty box of typed and handwritten papers, and I set to work. My now teenagers, who’d been *The Ickabog*’s very first audience, sat and listened to a nightly chapter once I’d nearly

finished. Every now and then they'd ask why I'd cut something they used to like, and naturally, I reinstated everything they missed, astounded by how much they remembered.

In addition to my very supportive family, I want to thank those who helped me bring *The Ickabog* online in such a short space of time: my editors, Arthur Levine and Ruth Alltimes; James McKnight of the Blair Partnership; my management team, Rebecca Salt, Nicky Stonehill, and Mark Hutchinson; and my agent, Neil Blair. It really was a Herculean effort by all concerned, and I couldn't be more grateful. I'd also like to thank every single child (and the occasional adult!) who submitted pictures for the illustration competition. Looking through the artwork has been a joy and I know I'm far from alone in marveling at the talent on display. I'd love to think *The Ickabog* gave some future artists and illustrators their first public exposure.

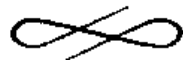
Returning to the land of Cornucopia and finishing what I started so long ago has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my writing life. All that remains to say is that I hope you enjoy reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JKR', with a large, looping flourish extending from the end.

J.K. Rowling
July 2020

CHAPTER 1

King Fred the Fearless



Once upon a time, there was a tiny country called Cornucopia, which had been ruled for centuries by a long line of fair-haired kings. The king at the time of which I write was called King Fred the Fearless. He'd announced the "Fearless" bit himself, on the morning of his coronation, partly because it sounded nice with "Fred," but also because he'd once managed to catch and kill a wasp all by himself, if you didn't count five footmen and the boot boy.

King Fred the Fearless came to the throne on a huge wave of popularity. He had lovely yellow curls, a fine sweeping moustache, and looked magnificent in the tight breeches, velvet doublets, and ruffled shirts that rich men wore at the time. Fred was said to be generous, smiled and waved whenever anyone caught sight of him, and looked awfully handsome in the portraits that were distributed throughout the kingdom, to be hung in town halls. The people of Cornucopia were most happy with their new king, and many thought he'd end up being even better at the job than his father, Richard the Righteous, whose teeth (though nobody had liked to mention it at the time) were rather crooked.

King Fred was secretly relieved to find out how easy it was to rule Cornucopia. In fact, the country seemed to run itself. Nearly everybody had lots of food, the merchants made pots of gold, and Fred's advisors took care of any little problem that arose. All that was left for Fred to do was beam at his subjects whenever he went out in his carriage and go hunting

five times a week with his two best friends, Lord Spittleworth and Lord Flapoon.

Spittleworth and Flapoon had large estates of their own in the country, but they found it much cheaper and more amusing to live at the palace with the king, eating his food, hunting his stags, and making sure that the king didn't get too fond of any of the beautiful ladies at court. They had no wish to see Fred married, because a queen might spoil all their fun. For a time, Fred had seemed to rather like Lady Eslanda, who was as dark and beautiful as Fred was fair and handsome, but Spittleworth had persuaded Fred that she was far too serious and bookish for the country to love her as queen. Fred didn't know that Lord Spittleworth had a grudge against Lady Eslanda. He'd once asked her to marry *him*, but she'd turned him down.

Lord Spittleworth was very thin, cunning, and clever. His friend Flapoon was ruddy-faced, and so enormous that it required six men to heave him onto his massive chestnut horse. Though not as clever as Spittleworth, Flapoon was still far sharper than the king.

Both lords were expert at flattery, and pretending to be astonished by how good Fred was at everything from riding to tiddlywinks. If Spittleworth had a particular talent, it was persuading the king to do things that suited Spittleworth, and if Flapoon had a gift, it was for convincing the king that nobody on earth was as loyal to the king as his two best friends.

Fred thought Spittleworth and Flapoon were jolly good chaps. They urged him to hold fancy parties, elaborate picnics, and sumptuous banquets, because Cornucopia was famous, far beyond its borders, for its food. Each of its cities was known for a different kind, and each was the very best in the world.

The capital of Cornucopia, Chouxville, lay in the south of the country, and was surrounded by acres of orchards, fields of shimmering golden wheat, and emerald-green grass, on which pure white dairy cows grazed. The cream, flour, and fruit produced by the farmers here was then given to the exceptional bakers of Chouxville, who made pastries.

Think, if you please, of the most delicious cake or cookie you have ever tasted. Well, let me tell you they'd have been downright ashamed to serve that in Chouxville. Unless a grown man's eyes filled with tears of pleasure as he bit into a Chouxville pastry, it was deemed a failure and never made again. The bakery windows of Chouxville were piled high with delicacies such as Maidens' Dreams, Fairies' Cradles, and, most famous of all, Hopes-of-Heaven, which were so exquisitely, painfully delicious that they were saved for special occasions and everybody cried for joy as they ate them. King Porfirio, of neighboring Pluritania, had already sent King Fred a letter, offering him the choice of any of his daughters' hands in marriage in exchange for a lifetime's supply of Hopesof-Heaven, but Spittleworth had advised Fred to laugh in the Pluritanian ambassador's face.

"His daughters are nowhere *near* pretty enough to exchange for Hopesof-Heaven, sire!" said Spittleworth.

To the north of Chouxville lay more green fields and clear, sparkling rivers, where jet-black cows and happy pink pigs were raised. These in turn served the twin cities of Kurdsburg and Baronstown, which were separated from each other by an arching stone bridge over the main river of Cornucopia, the Fluma, where brightly colored barges bore goods from one end of the kingdom to another.

Kurdsburg was famous for its cheeses: huge white wheels, dense orange cannonballs, big crumbly blue-veined barrels, and little baby cream cheeses smoother than velvet.

Baronstown was celebrated for its smoked and honey-roasted hams, its sides of bacon, its spicy sausages, its melting beefsteaks, and its venison pies.

The savory fumes rising from the chimneys of the redbrick Baronstown stoves mingled with the odorous tang wafting from the doorways of the Kurdsburg cheesemongers, and for forty miles all around, it was impossible not to salivate breathing in the delicious air.

A few hours north of Kurdsburg and Baronstown, you came upon acres of vineyards bearing grapes as large as eggs, each of them ripe and sweet and juicy. Journey onward for the rest of the day and you reached the

granite city of Jeroboam, famous for its wines. They said of the Jeroboam air that you could get tipsy simply walking its streets. The best vintages changed hands for thousands upon thousands of gold coins, and the Jeroboam wine merchants were some of the richest men in the kingdom.

But a little north of Jeroboam, a strange thing happened. It was as though the magically rich land of Cornucopia had exhausted itself by producing the best grass, the best fruit, and the best wheat in the world. Right at the northern tip came the place known as the Marshlands, and the only thing that grew there were some tasteless, rubbery mushrooms and thin, dry grass, only good enough to feed a few mangy sheep.

The Marshlanders who tended the sheep didn't have the sleek, wellrounded, well-dressed appearance of the citizens of Jeroboam, Baronstown, Kurdsburg, or Chouxville. They were gaunt and ragged. Their poorly nourished sheep never fetched very good prices, either in Cornucopia or abroad, so very few Marshlanders ever got to taste the delights of Cornucopian wine, cheese, beef, or pastries. The most common dish in the Marshlands was a greasy mutton broth, made of those sheep who were too old to sell.

The rest of Cornucopia found the Marshlanders an odd bunch — surly, dirty, and ill-tempered. They had rough voices, which the other Cornucopians imitated, making them sound like hoarse old sheep. Jokes were made about their manners and their simplicity. As far as the rest of Cornucopia was concerned, the only memorable thing that had ever come out of the Marshlands was the legend of the Ickabog.



King Fred the Fearless came to the throne on a huge wave of popularity.
By Sarah, Age 11

CHAPTER 2

The Ickabog



The legend of the Ickabog had been passed down by generations of Marshlanders, and spread by word of mouth all the way to Chouxville. Nowadays, everybody knew the story. Naturally, as with all legends, it changed a little depending on who was telling it. However, every story agreed that a monster lived at the very northernmost tip of the country, in a wide patch of dark and often misty marsh too dangerous for humans to enter. The monster was said to eat children and sheep. Sometimes it even carried off grown men and women who strayed too close to the marsh at night.

The habits and appearance of the Ickabog changed depending on who was describing it. Some made it snakelike, others dragonish or wolflike. Some said it roared, others that it hissed, and still others said that it drifted as silently as the mists that descended on the marsh without warning.

The Ickabog, they said, had extraordinary powers. It could imitate the human voice to lure travelers into its clutches. If you tried to kill it, it would mend magically, or else split into two Ickabogs; it could fly, spurt fire, shoot poison — the Ickabog’s powers were as great as the imagination of the teller.

“Mind you don’t leave the garden while I’m working,” parents all over the kingdom would tell their children, “or the Ickabog will catch you and eat you all up!” And throughout the land, boys and girls played at fighting the Ickabog, tried to frighten one another with the tale of the Ickabog, and

even, if the story became too convincing, had nightmares about the Ickabog.

Bert Beamish was one such little boy. When a family called the Dovetails came over for dinner one night, Mr. Dovetail entertained everybody with what he claimed was the latest news of the Ickabog. That night, five-year-old Bert woke, sobbing and terrified, from a dream in which the monster's huge white eyes were gleaming at him across a foggy marsh into which he was slowly sinking.

"There, there," whispered his mother, who'd tiptoed into his room with a candle and now rocked him backward and forward in her lap. "There is no Ickabog, Bertie. It's just a silly story."

"B-but Mr. Dovetail said sheep have g-gone missing!" hiccupped Bert.

"So they have," said Mrs. Beamish, "but not because a monster took them. Sheep are foolish creatures. They wander off and get lost in the marsh."

"B-but Mr. Dovetail said p-people disappear too!"

"Only people who're silly enough to stray into the marsh at night," said Mrs. Beamish. "Hush now, Bertie, there is no monster."

"But Mr. D-Dovetail said p-people heard voices outside their windows and in the m-morning their chickens were gone!" Mrs. Beamish couldn't help but laugh.

"The voices they heard are ordinary thieves, Bertie. Up in the Marshlands they pilfer from one another all the time. It's easier to blame the Ickabog than to admit their neighbors are stealing from them!"

"Stealing?" gasped Bert, sitting up in his mother's lap and gazing at her with solemn eyes. "Stealing's very naughty, isn't it, Mummy?"

"It's very naughty indeed," said Mrs. Beamish, lifting up Bert, placing him tenderly back into his warm bed, and tucking him in. "But luckily, we don't live near those lawless Marshlanders."

She picked up her candle and tiptoed back toward the bedroom door.

"Night, night," she whispered from the doorway. She'd normally have added "don't let the Ickabog bite," which was what parents across

Cornucopia said to their children at bedtime, but instead she said, "Sleep tight."

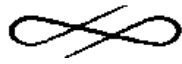
Bert fell asleep again, and saw no more monsters in his dreams.

It so happened that Mr. Dovetail and Mrs. Beamish were great friends. They'd been in the same class at school, and had known each other all their lives. When Mr. Dovetail heard that he'd given Bert nightmares, he felt guilty. As he was the best carpenter in all of Chouxville, he decided to carve the little boy an Ickabog. It had a wide, smiling mouth full of teeth and big, clawed feet, and at once it became Bert's favorite toy.

If Bert, or his parents, or the Dovetails next door, or anybody else in the whole kingdom of Cornucopia had been told that terrible troubles were about to engulf Cornucopia, all because of the myth of the Ickabog, they'd have laughed. They lived in the happiest kingdom in the world. What harm could the Ickabog do?

CHAPTER 3

Death of a Seamstress



The Beamish and Dovetail families both lived in a place called the City-Within-The-City. This was the part of Chouxville where all the people who worked for King Fred had houses. Gardeners, cooks, tailors, pageboys, seamstresses, stonemasons, grooms, carpenters, footmen, and maids: all of them occupied neat little cottages just outside the palace grounds.

The City-Within-The-City was separated from the rest of Chouxville by a high white wall, and the gates in the wall stood open during the day, so that the residents could visit friends and family in the rest of Chouxville, and go to the markets. By night, the sturdy gates were closed, and everyone in the City-Within-The-City slept, like the king, under the protection of the Royal Guard.

Major Beamish, Bert's father, was head of the Royal Guard. A handsome, cheerful man who rode a steel-gray horse, he accompanied King Fred, Lord Spittleworth, and Lord Flapoon on their hunting trips, which usually happened five times a week. The king liked Major Beamish, and he also liked Bert's mother, because Bertha Beamish was the king's own private pastry chef, a high honor in that city of world-class bakers. Due to Bertha's habit of bringing home fancy cakes that hadn't turned out absolutely perfectly, Bert was a plump little boy, and sometimes, I regret to say, the other children called him "Butterball" and made him cry. Bert's best friend was Daisy Dovetail. The two children had been born days apart, and acted more like brother and sister than playmates. Daisy was

Bert's defender against bullies. She was skinny but fast, and more than ready to fight anyone who called Bert "Butterball."

Daisy's father, Dan Dovetail, was the king's carpenter, repairing and replacing the wheels and shafts on his carriages. As Mr. Dovetail was so clever at carving, he also made bits of furniture for the palace.

Daisy's mother, Dora Dovetail, was the Head Seamstress of the palace — another honored job, because King Fred liked clothes, and kept a whole team of tailors busy making him new costumes every month.

It was the king's great fondness for finery that led to a nasty incident which the history books of Cornucopia would later record as the beginning of all the troubles that were to engulf that happy little kingdom. At the time it happened, only a few people within the City-Within-The-City knew anything about it, though for some, it was an awful tragedy.

What happened was this.

The King of Pluritania came to pay a formal visit to Fred (still hoping, perhaps, to exchange one of his daughters for a lifetime's supply of Hopesof-Heaven) and Fred decided that he must have a brand-new set of clothes made for the occasion: dull purple, overlaid with silver lace, with amethyst buttons, and gray fur at the cuffs.

Now, King Fred had heard something about the Head Seamstress not being quite well, but he hadn't paid much attention. He didn't trust anyone but Daisy's mother to stitch on the silver lace properly, so gave the order that nobody else should be given the job. In consequence, Daisy's mother sat up three nights in a row, racing to finish the purple suit in time for the King of Pluritania's visit, and at dawn on the fourth day, her assistant found her lying on the floor, dead, with the very last amethyst button in her hand.

The king's Chief Advisor came to break the news, while Fred was still having his breakfast. The Chief Advisor was a wise old man called Herringbone, with a silver beard that hung almost to his knees. After explaining that the Head Seamstress had died, he said:

"But I'm sure one of the other ladies will be able to fix on the last button for Your Majesty."

There was a look in Herringbone's eye that King Fred didn't like. It gave him a squirming feeling in the pit of his stomach.

While his dressers were helping him into the new purple suit later that morning, Fred tried to make himself feel less guilty by talking the matter over with Lords Spittleworth and Flapoon.

"I mean to say, if I'd known she was seriously ill," panted Fred, as the servants heaved him into his skin-tight satin pantaloons, "naturally I'd have let someone else sew the suit."

"Your Majesty is so kind," said Spittleworth, as he examined his sallow complexion in the mirror over the fireplace. "A more tenderhearted monarch was never born."

"The woman should have spoken up if she felt unwell," grunted Flapoon from a cushioned seat by the window. "If she's not fit to work, she should've said so. Properly looked at, that's disloyalty to the king. Or to your suit, anyway."

"Flapoon's right," said Spittleworth, turning away from the mirror. "Nobody could treat his servants better than you do, sire."

"I *do* treat them well, don't I?" said King Fred anxiously, sucking in his stomach as the dressers did up his amethyst buttons. "And after all, chaps, I've got to look my blasted best today, haven't I? You know how dressy the King of Pluritania always is!"

"It would be a matter of national shame if you were any less well-dressed than the King of Pluritania," said Spittleworth.

"Put this unhappy occurrence out of your mind, sire," said Flapoon. "A disloyal seamstress is no reason to spoil a sunny day."

And yet, in spite of the two lords' advice, King Fred couldn't be quite easy in his mind. Perhaps he was imagining it, but he thought Lady Eslanda looked particularly serious that day. The servants' smiles seemed colder and the maids' curtsies a little less deep. As his court feasted that evening with the King of Pluritania, Fred's thoughts kept drifting back to the seamstress, dead on the floor, with the last amethyst button clutched in her hand.

Before Fred went to bed that night, Herringbone knocked on his bedroom door. After bowing deeply, the Chief Advisor asked whether the king was intending to send flowers to Mrs. Dovetail's funeral.

"Oh — oh, yes!" said Fred, startled. "Yes, send a big wreath, you know, saying how sorry I am and so forth. You can arrange that, can't you, Herringbone?"

"Certainly, sire," said the Chief Advisor. "And — if I may ask — are you planning to visit the seamstress's family, at all? They live, you know, just a short walk from the palace gates."

"Visit them?" said the king pensively. "Oh, no, Herringbone, I don't think I'd like — I mean to say, I'm sure they aren't expecting that."

Herringbone and the king looked at each other for a few seconds, then the Chief Advisor bowed and left the room.

Now, as King Fred was used to everyone telling him what a marvelous chap he was, he really didn't like the frown with which the Chief Advisor had left. He now began to feel cross rather than ashamed.

"It's a bally pity," he told his reflection, turning back to the mirror in which he'd been combing his moustache before bed, "but after all, I'm the king and she was a seamstress. If I died, I wouldn't have expected *her* to —"

But then it occurred to him that if he died, he'd expect the whole of Cornucopia to stop whatever they were doing, dress all in black, and weep for a week, just as they'd done for his father, Richard the Righteous.

"Well, anyway," he said impatiently to his reflection, "life goes on."

He put on his silk nightcap, climbed into his four-poster bed, blew out the candle, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 4

The Quiet House

