

## 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 travellers 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 each other 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 backwards and forwards in her lap. "There is no Ickabog, Bertie. It's just a silly story."

"B-but Mr Dovetail said sheep have g-gone missing!" hiccoughed 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 onto 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 each other all the time. It’s easier to blame the Ickabog than to admit their neighbours 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 towards 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 favourite 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?