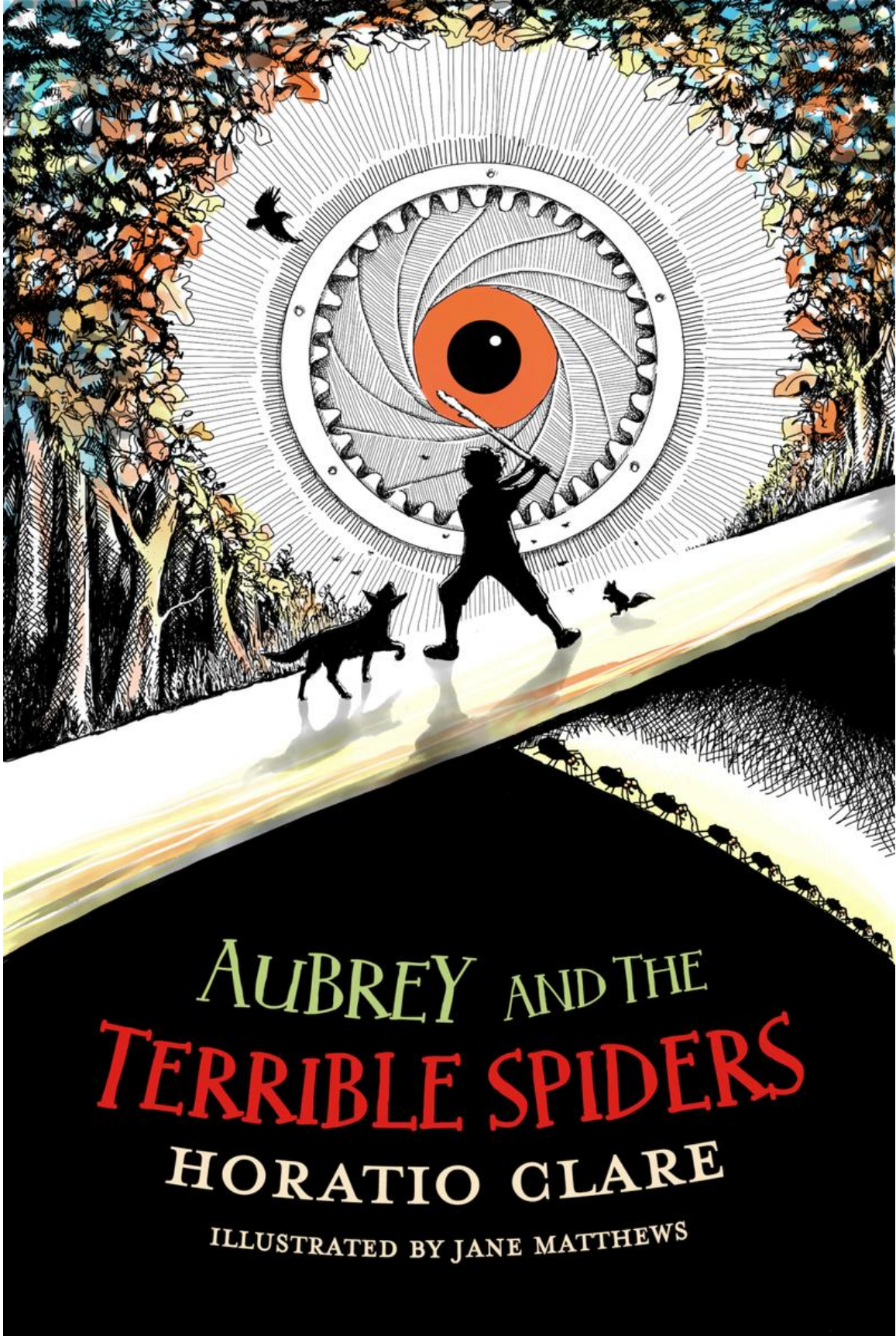




AUBREY AND THE
TERRIBLE SPIDERS

HORATIO CLARE

ILLUSTRATED BY JANE MATTHEWS



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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Chapter 1: You Can't Catch Chickens](#)

[Chapter 2: You Still Can't Catch Chickens \(or Sheep, Pigs, Cows, Horses or Goats, for that Matter\)](#)

[Chapter 3: News of the News Reaches the News](#)

[Chapter 4: Life and Wasps \(or Be Careful What You Wish For\)](#)

[Chapter 5: Stung Again](#)

[Chapter 6: Some Notes on the Historical Role of Hornets](#)

[Chapter 7: Fighting a Hornet \(by Mistake\)](#)

[Chapter 8: Terrible Spiders](#)

[Chapter 9: The Eve of Battle](#)

[Chapter 10: Big B](#)

[Chapter 11: Edie Morris](#)

[Chapter 12: Fantastic Chaos](#)

[Chapter 13: The Voice of the Woods and the Wild](#)

[Chapter 14: The Battle of Rushing Wood](#)

[Chapter 15: Humans Are Animals Too](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also in this Series](#)

[Copyright](#)

CHAPTER 1

You Can't Catch Chickens

Catching a chicken is much harder than catching a shark. Stick a lump of meat on a hook and throw it into some sharky water and you will have a shark in no time. Try that with chickens and they will just give you funny looks. Chickens are descended from birds called Red Jungle Fowl. That tells you something.

'If they were as big as sheep, you could tackle them!' Aubrey shouted to his mother, Suzanne, who had just tried and failed to catch one.

It was a beautiful evening in the early summer. Sunlight was still catching the leaves. Midges were dancing in clouds of dots over the beck and Aubrey was having an interesting day. He had been chased by three wasps which had seemed determined to follow him about, as if he were wearing black and eating a jam sandwich.

While he ran pell-mell through the meadow below his house shouting '**BUZZ OFF, WASPS!**' and other things, and trying to swipe the insects with sticks and bracken stalks, he had not noticed a small head watching him over the wall by the lane.

The head belonged to Edie Morris. Edie was almost always up to something. Today Edie was taking a close interest in Aubrey. The two were friends in school. They had not spent that much time together, but they liked each other and they laughed at the same things. Aubrey had noticed that Edie hardly ever used more words than she needed, that she read books that made the teachers

look surprised, and that you never knew what she was going to do next.

Wasps hate black and love jam. It's just the way they are. But Aubrey was wearing shorts and a t-shirt. As far as he knew, wasps have no problems with these things. But who can tell, really?

Anyway, right now, Aubrey and his mum Suzanne were trying to catch chickens. The woman who owned the birds, their friend Jayne, was in Belgium, playing a rock concert to Belgian Goths. When Jayne asked Suzanne and Aubrey if they wouldn't mind putting her chickens away, they said of course they wouldn't - but that was after watching Jayne do it. Jayne made it look easy.

She said: 'Bedtime girls!' and opened the coop. In the birds went.

Now Jayne was four hundred miles away wearing black lipstick and singing about misery to a crowd of Goths, which made them very happy, while back in Britain her chickens had turned into a bunch of ferocious guerrillas. Like all guerrillas, they were using The Land to their advantage.

The Land, as everyone called it, was a lovely wild patch of nettles and briars between the playing field and the first big bend in the beck. There were all sorts of manky old buildings, weird huts, broken fences, piles of rotted garden furniture and old sheets of glass lying around on the bit Jayne owned. It was the ideal place for a chicken hunt, if you were a chicken, and the perfect place for guerrilla war, if you were a guerrilla.

'They're not faster than us ... I could definitely ... beat one in a race,' Aubrey panted. 'But they change direction really quickly!'

He almost got close enough to Pinny to touch her tail as she scooted under the coop.

'And they jump and **DUCK!**' cried Suzanne, lunging at a hen named Ginny.

Ginny dived sideways and evaded her.

'You're just about to get one and they do that fly-jumping thing!' Aubrey shouted, laughing as a black hen named Barbara did exactly that, flapping her wings in a wild panicky manner which looked silly until it propelled the whole chicken out of reach, like a fat bee doing a space jump.



Suddenly there was a **BUZZING** sound by his ear. He ducked, and a wasp shot past him.

'Wasps again!' he yelled. Seizing a whippy stick, he swished wildly at the wasp, which flew out of reach. Boy and wasp faced each other. 'Come on then!' Aubrey cried,

and charged the wasp. The wasp thought better of it and flew off.

‘What’s got into these wasps?’ he said.

‘What’s got into these chickens?’ Suzanne asked.

She looked straight at Aubrey then, because she knew he had an unusual relationship with animals and birds. His exploits had led Suzanne to believe that her son knew how animals thought. In fact, he understood everything any creature said. You could call it a superpower, but Aubrey never did. It was just something he could do, like some people can do handstands.

‘It’s Barbara,’ he said. ‘She’s telling them to sleep out – and she’s making Edgar think it’s his idea.’

Edgar was the cockerel. His green and gold feathers and his scarlet wattles were magnificent.

Aubrey had been a bit wary of cockerels ever since he had been attacked by one. He was not planning to take any nonsense from Edgar.

‘Get in the coop, Edgar,’ he said, like he meant it.

Edgar looked completely flummoxed. Either he was faking or he was very dim.

Jayne, Aubrey remembered, murmured baby sounds and made a kind of hopping movement with her eyes. He tried it. Edgar immediately jumped into the coop.

‘Got you!’ Aubrey said. Edgar narrowed his eyes. Just for an instant he did not look dim at all.

Now Suzanne tried to persuade Ginny and Pinny into the henhouse. The hens went under it, not into it.

Suzanne rolled her eyes.

‘Edgar says sleep out!’ Barbara clucked slyly.

‘**Sleep OUT!**’ shouted Edgar.

He looked surprised and crowed loudly to cover his confusion. ‘**Time to get UP!**’ he yelled.

He jumped out of the coop.

'Back IN!' said Aubrey.

He grabbed Edgar and stuck him back in.

'Oppression!' yelled Barbara. 'Rebel! Run! Hide!'

The chickens squawked and dashed in all directions.

'What's got into you?' Aubrey demanded of Barbara.

'Surely you need to go to bed - or the fox will get you?'

'Humans bad!' Barbara clucked. '**Chickens say NO!**'

'If you think we're bad, wait until you meet the foxes and the cats. You'll be chicken nuggets.'

'**COCKERELS SAY NO!**' screamed Edgar, looking incredibly proud of himself.

'We could set Lupo on them,' Aubrey said. Lupo was Aubrey's husky pup. He was a year old, and the runt of his litter, which meant he was small for a husky and full of bounce. The arrival of Lupo on Aubrey's birthday a year ago had been one of the best things that had ever happened to the little boy. Lupo had become like a brother to him. The boy and the dog loved each other, despite Lupo's bad habits. For hundreds of years huskies were bred to be fast and strong and pull sledges. Lupo's instincts meant he did not come back when you called him; he would chase sheep, cows and chickens if he got the chance. At home he was a bandit - he would raid the bins and steal food from the kitchen. He looked a bit like a guilty dingo when he was caught out doing something mischievous; Jim, Aubrey's father, had nicknamed him the Bin Dingo*. Now the Bin Dingo was tied to a post by his lead on the edge of The Land, and he was going wild with frustration at not being able to chase the chickens.

'I don't think that would be a good idea,' said Suzanne. 'He'd kill them.'

'I suppose he would,' said Aubrey.

'He definitely would. Like many children have an instinct which makes them curious about swords and guns, lots of dogs have an instinct to kill chickens. The difference is the dogs will always want to eat the chickens but children grow out of swords and guns!'

Aubrey grinned. He and his mother had a long-standing disagreement over weapons. Aubrey found toy guns and missiles fascinating. Suzanne hated them. A crow named Corone had been watching the goings-on around the coop. Now Corone yelled, 'Chickens say NO!' in his loud kaarking voice. He flew off to find someone to tell. He met some magpies who were hanging around at the edge of the village cricket pitch looking for trouble.

Corone told them about the chickens' revolt.

The magpies told the jackdaws who lived on Mr Greenwood's farm.

The jackdaws told Mr Greenwood's sheep, his cows, his chickens, his geese, his cats, his daughter's rabbit Dennis[†] and his sheep dogs.

* Dingoes are beautiful and ancient wild dogs which live in Australia.

† Dennis is actually a doe called Serena.

CHAPTER 2

You Still Can't Catch Chickens (or Sheep, Pigs, Cows, Horses or Goats, for that Matter)

Meanwhile, back on the Land, the chickens were still winning.

'We can't catch them!' said Suzanne. She looked flushed and happy. Running marathons and chasing chickens seemed to light her up.

'Can I get my catapult?' Aubrey suggested, helpfully.

He had a catapult which would have knocked sense into or out of anything smaller than a whale shark. Aubrey was not really sure when his enthusiasm for weapons had begun. When he was really quite young he said to his father, Jim, 'Dad, what's the most powerful bomb in the world?'

Jim tried always to answer his son's questions honestly.

'That would be the nuclear bomb, Aubrey,' he said.

'Can I have one?'

'No.'

'Can I have a toy nuclear bomb?'

'No. In fact, they don't make toy nuclear bombs.'

'Why not?'

'Well, because the nuclear bomb is so terrible, so very powerful, that people don't like to think about them. Nuclear bombs could destroy the entire world. So we hope and pray no one ever fires one, and we definitely don't make toys out of them.'