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opening extract from

Here Be Monsters!

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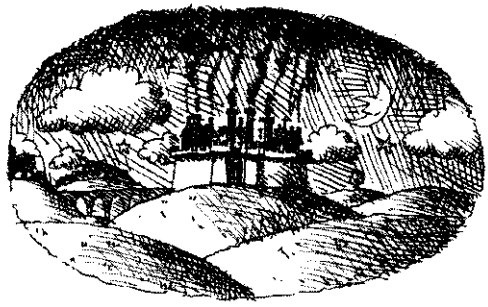
Alan Snow

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Ratbridge

Chapter 1

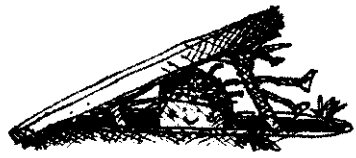
Coming Up!

It was a late Sunday evening and Ratbridge stood silver grey and silent in the moonlight. Early evening rain had washed away the cloud of smoke that normally hung over the town, and now long shadows from the factory chimneys fell across oily puddles in the empty streets. The town was at rest.

The shadows moved slowly across the lane that ran behind Fore Street revealing a heavy iron drain cover set amongst the cobbles.

Then the drain cover moved. Something was pushing it up from below.

One side of the cover lifted a few inches, and from beneath it, a pair of eyes scanned the lane. The drain cover lifted further, then slid sideways. A boy's head wearing a woven helmet with nine or ten antennae rose through the hole and glanced around. The boy shut his eyes, and he



A pair of eyes scanned the lane

listened. For a moment all was quiet, then a distant dog bark echoed off the walls. Silence returned. The boy opened his eyes, reached out of the hole, and pulled himself up and out into the lane. He was dressed very strangely. In addition to the helmet he wore a large vest knitted from soft rope, that reached the ground, and under that a short one-piece suit made from old sugar sacks. His feet were wrapped in layers of rough cloth, tied with string.

Fixed about his body by wide leather straps was a strange contraption. On his front was a wooden box with a winding handle on one side, and two brass buttons and a knob on the front. A flexible metal tube connected the box to a pair of folded wings, made from leather, wood, and brass, that were attached to his back.

The boy slid the drain cover back into place, reached inside his under-suit and pulled out a toy figure dressed just like him. He held the doll out and spoke.

'Grandfather, I am up top. I think I'll have to go gardening tonight. It's a Sunday, and everything is shut. The bins behind the inn will be empty.' He looked at the doll.

There was a crackle of static, and a thin voice came from the doll. 'Well, you be careful, Arthur! And remember, only take from the bigger gardens . . . and only then if they have plenty! There are

a lot of people that can only survive by growing their own food.'

Arthur smiled. He had heard this many times before. 'Don't worry, Grandfather, I haven't forgotten! I'll only take what we need . . . and I will be careful. I'll see you as soon as I am done.'



'Grandfather, I am up top'

Arthur replaced the doll inside his suit, then started to wind the handle on the box on his front. As he wound it made a soft whirring noise. For nearly two minutes he wound, pausing occasionally when his hand started aching. Then a bell pinged from somewhere inside the box and he stopped. Arthur scanned the skyline, crouched, and then pressed one of the buttons. The wings on his back unfolded. He pressed the other button and at the same moment jumped as high as he could. Silently the wings rushed down and caught the air as he rose. At the bottom of their stroke they folded, rose, and then beat down again. His wings were holding him in the air, a few feet above the ground. Arthur's hand reached for the knob and he turned it just a little. As he did so he tilted himself a little forward. He started to move. Arthur smiled . . . he was flying.



He was flying

He moved slowly down the lane, keeping below the top of its walls. When he reached the end, he adjusted the knob again, and rose up to a gap between the twin roofs of the Glue Factory. Arthur knew routes that were safe from the eyes of the townsfolk, and would keep to one of these tonight on the way to the particular garden he planned on visiting. When it was dark or there was thick smog, things were easy. But tonight was clear and the moon full. He'd been spotted twice before on nights like these, by children, from their bedroom windows. He'd got away with it so far, as nobody had believed them when they said they had seen a fairy or flying boy, but tonight he was not going to take any chances.



He adjusted the knob



A horse started and whinnied as he flew over

Arthur reached the end of the gap between the roofs. He dipped a little and flew across a large stable yard. A horse started and whinnied as he flew over. He adjusted his wing speed and increased his height. The horse made him feel uneasy. At the far side of the yard he rose again over a huge gate, topped with spikes. He crossed a deserted alley, then moved down a narrow street flanked with the windowless backs of houses. At the far end of the street he slowed and then hovered in the air. In front of him was another high wall. Carefully he adjusted the knob, and rose very gently to the point where he could just see the ground beyond the wall. It was a large vegetable garden. Across the garden fell paths of pale light, cast from the windows of the house. Arthur looked towards it. One of the windows was open. From it he could hear raised voices and the clatter of dominoes.

That should keep them busy! he thought, scanning the garden again. Against the wall furthest from the house was a large glass lean-to.

He checked the windows of the house again, then rose over the wall and headed for the greenhouse, keeping above the beams of light from the house. He came to rest in front of the greenhouse door.

Silently Arthur turned off and folded his wings. He opened the door, and a soft rush of warm perfumed air brushed his face. It was a mixture of smells—some familiar, some not.

Dark leafy forms filled the greenhouse. Some were suspended from the roof, while others climbed almost invisible strings. Some larger ones just hogged the ground. As Arthur entered he recognized tomato plants climbing the strings, and cucumbers and grapes hanging from above.

He moved past all these, and made his way to a tree against the far wall.

It was a tall tree with branches only at its top. Dangling from a stem below the branches was what looked like a stack of huge fat upside-down spiders. It was a large bunch of bananas. As Arthur got closer he caught their scent. It was beautiful.

Arthur could hardly contain his delight. Bananas! He tore one from the bunch, then peeled and ate it ravenously. When he had finished it, he turned and checked the house. Nothing had changed. Turning back to the tree, he reached inside his under-suit and pulled out a string bag, then reached up to the banana bunch and pulled eagerly. It was



What looked like a huge stack of fat upside-down spiders

not as easy to pick the full bunch as it had been to pull off a single banana, and Arthur found he had to put his full weight on the bunch. A soft fibrous tearing sound started, but still the bunch did not come down. In desperation, Arthur lifted his feet from the ground and swung his legs. All of a sudden there was a crack and the whole bunch, along with Arthur, fell to the ground. The tree trunk sprang back up and struck the glass roof with a loud crack. The noise sounded out across the garden.

'Oi! There is something in the greenhouse,' came a shout from the house.

Hearing the shout, Arthur scrambled to his feet, grabbed the string bag and looked out through the glass. No one was in the garden yet. He rushed to collect up as many of the

bananas as possible, shoving them into the bag. Then he heard a door bang and the sound of footsteps. He ran out of the greenhouse into the garden.



A very large lady with a very long stick

Clambering towards him over the rows of vegetables was a very large lady with a very long stick. Arthur dashed over to one of the garden walls, stabbed at the buttons on the front of his box, and jumped. His wings snapped open and started to beat, but not strongly enough to lift him. He landed back on the ground, his wings fluttering behind him. Arthur groaned—the bananas! He had to adjust the wings for the extra weight. But he was not ready to put the bananas down and fly away empty-handed—they were too precious. Still clutching the string bag with the bananas in one hand, he grabbed for the knob on the front of the box with the other hand, and twisted it hard. The wings immediately doubled their beating and became a blur. Just as the woman reached

the spot where Arthur stood, he shot almost vertically upwards, just avoiding her outstretched hand. Furious, she swung her stick above her head and, before he could get out of range, landed a hard blow on his wings, sending him spinning.

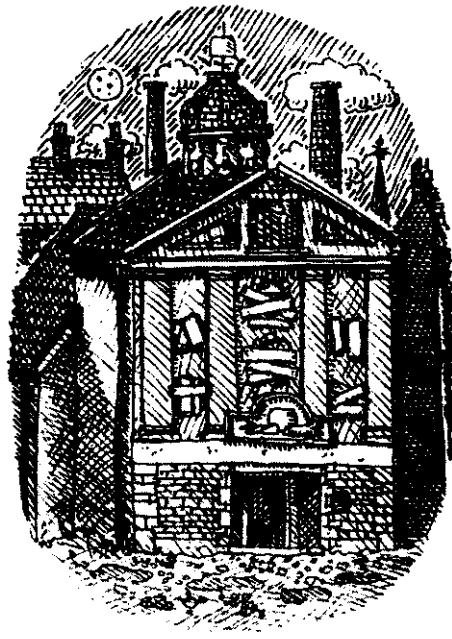
'You little varmint! Come down here and give me back my bananas!' the woman cried. Arthur grasped at the top of the wall to steady himself. The stick now swished inches below his feet. He adjusted the wings quickly, and made off over the wall. Shouts of anger followed him.

Arthur felt sick to the pit of his stomach. Coming up at night to collect food was always risky, and this was the closest he'd ever been to being caught. He needed somewhere quiet to rest and recover.

I wish we could live above ground like everybody else! he thought.

Now he flew across the town by the safest route he knew—flying between roofs, up the darkest alleys, and across deserted yards, till finally he reached the abandoned Cheese Hall. He knew he would be alone here.

The Cheese Hall had been the grandest of all the buildings in the town and was only overshadowed by a few of the factory chimneys. In former times, it had been the home of the Ratbridge Cheese Guild. But now the industry was dead, and the Guild and all its members ruined. The Hall was now boarded up and deserted. Its gilded statues that once shone out across the town were blackened by the very soot that had poisoned the cheese.



The Cheese Hall

Arthur landed on the bridge of the roof, and settled himself amongst the statues. As he sat catching his breath it occurred to him that maybe he should inspect his wings for damage. The woman had landed a fairly heavy blow, but Arthur decided it would be too dangerous and awkward to take his wings off high up here on the roof, and besides they seemed to be fine. Something distracted him from his thoughts—a noise. It sounded like a mournful bleat, from somewhere below. He listened carefully, intrigued, but

heard no more. When he finally felt calm again, he stowed the bananas behind one of the statues, climbed out from his hiding place, and flew up to the best observation spot in the whole town. This was the plinth on the top of the dome that supported the weathervane and lightning conductor.

A complete panorama of the town and the surrounding countryside, broken only by the chimneystacks of the factories, was laid out before him. In the far distance he could just make out some sort of procession in the moonlight making for the woods. It looked as though something was being chased by a group of horses.



The plinth that supported the weathervane and lightning conductor