Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

The Honourable Ratts

written by

Karen Wallace

published by

Bloomsbury Publishing

All text is copyright of the author and / or the illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

To Claire, with thanks

First published 2009 by
A & C Black Publishers Ltd
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

www.acblack.com

Text copyright © 2009 Karen Wallace
Illustrations copyright © 2009 Sue Mason

The rights of Karen Wallace and Sue Mason to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work respectively have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

ISBN: 978-1-4081-0622-8

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems – without the prior permission in writing of the publishers.

This book is produced using paper that is made from wood grown in managed, sustainable forests. It is natural, renewable and recyclable. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading RG1 8EX.

The Honourable Ratts



Karen Wallace

Illustrated by Sue Mason

A & C Black • London

Chapter One

The water in the lake was thick and syrupy, and the bubbles that broke on the surface were big and fat. They went *splot*! then *pop*! With each *splot*! and *pop*! came a puff of something really smelly. The smell was like rotten eggs. It floated like a yellow fog down the valley and through the trees. It snaked through the long grass in the field, and finally crept into the cracks in the crumbling walls of a house called Clawfoot Hall.

Splot! *pop*! *splot*! *pop*! The sound of the bubbles was almost like a signal coming up from the oozy bottom of the lake.

Clawfoot Hall was vast and dark. Its rooms were empty and the big, iron gates at the front were padlocked shut. But beneath the floorboards of the abandoned house, two tiny, silver-haired ladies sat on two very small chairs in a warm, comfortable drawing room full of carved miniature furniture, with gold-framed portraits on the walls.

One of the ladies sniffed and frowned. 'Mark my words, Araminta,' said Candice Ratt, fixing her beady eyes on her sister. 'A bad smell is a bad omen.'



Araminta Ratt shot a worried look at the portraits of a girl and boy that were hanging on the wall. They were of her neice Zola and her nephew Spencer and, as the only other surviving members of the family, their safety was of the greatest importance.

'I agree,' she said, twisting her handkerchief around her bony fingers. 'For the past week I have been plagued by the *oddest* twitch in my nose.'

'I do wish you wouldn't use that word,' said Candice. 'You know it upsets me.'

'Which word?'

'Why *plagued*, of course,' said Candice, sharply. From the direction of the lake came another loud *splot*! followed by a *pop*! Once again the room filled with the stink of rotten eggs. 'It reminds me of those awful stories about boils and bodies and fleas.'

'And rats,' said Araminta, in a teasing voice. 'Really, Candice, when are you going to admit that the tiniest amount of rat blood *still* flows through our veins.'

Candice stuck her chin in the air and looked away. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said.

'Of course you do,' said Araminta. 'You just don't like to admit it.' She leaned forward in her chair. 'At the very beginning of our family, when our ancestor, Thumbelina, met her prince, he wasn't wearing a rat costume, Candice. He was a real, live *rat*.'

'That's just a fairy tale,' muttered Candice, but she couldn't look her sister in the eyes.

'Of course it's not a fairy tale!' cried Araminta. 'Where else would we get our sharp hearing? Those bubbles are coming from the *lake* and the lake is a quarter of a *mile* away.'

Araminta lifted the teapot that sat on a table between them. The family crest was painted on the side - a shiny, gold claw against a chequered background of green and red.

'This isn't a *glove*, Candice. It's our ancestor's *claw*!'

Candice sagged on her chair. 'I prefer to think of it as a glove. And don't forget that only the most *aristocratic* blood runs through our veins.'

'Of course not,' agreed Araminta. 'But that doesn't explain why we're so small.'

'It's because the tall side of the Ratt family moved away,' said Candice defensively. 'Noble families intermarry. Everyone knows that. Our problem was that only the small Ratts were left behind.'

'You know perfectly well there's another reason,' said Araminta. 'And I believe our great-great-grandfather, Sir Walter, knew about it when he decided on the Great Move Below.'

At this moment Candice would have chipped off a piece of parmesan cheese from the block that usually sat on the sideboard. The taste of parmesan always soothed her. But she and Araminta had finished it days ago, and now all they seemed to do was argue. Whatever the reason for their small size, living in the big rooms of Clawfoot Hall had begun to cause their ancestors more and more problems.

A hundred years ago, in Sir Walter's time, the family had been forced to climb ladders to sit on their chairs around the dining-room table. The china became too heavy to pick up and the cutlery was too large to handle. Then a boy called Montague almost drowned in his porridge, and on the same morning Sir Walter discovered that he couldn't reach the handle of his own front door.

That had been the turning point, and both Araminta and Candice had heard the story passed down from generation to generation.

Sir Walter had taken himself off to consult the family soothsayer, who was called Big Ma Knucklebone. No one seemed to question the fact that Big Ma Knucklebone had served and advised the Ratt family from the time they had

first been given their lands and titles some five hundred years before. The wise, warty old lady was always there with her pouch of little bones, which she rolled to see the future. Whatever Big Ma Knucklebone had said to Sir Walter remained a secret, but on his return to Clawfoot Hall, he made a huge announcement.

Over the next few years, miniature copies of the rooms upstairs were built under the floorboards of the Hall. Sir Walter only used craftsmen and builders from abroad, and the work took place at night, so no one in the nearby village of Black Landing had any idea of what was going on.

All furniture, glassware and silver were specially made and imported from far away. Bed linen and tablecloths were sewn to fit small beds and tiny tables. Even the family portraits were repainted and placed in little gold frames. When everything was finished, Sir Walter had padlocked the front gates to Clawfoot Hall and told his family that they would all make the Great Move Below.

A tiny carriage clock ticked in the background. Usually Candice found the sound soothing. Now it only made her more edgy.

'Do you think we're still safe here?' asked Candice, trying to sound hopeful.

'No reason why not,' replied Araminta. 'Only Big Ma Knucklebone knows about the Great Move Below. The people in the village think we come from Ireland and live in a cottage in the woods.' She chewed her lip and looked longingly at the empty cheese dish. 'The only worry is Melchior Grime.'

'I agree.' Candice shuddered. 'Every time Zola goes to the village, I worry that he might see her and guess who she really is.'

Araminta didn't speak for a moment. Then she said, 'I think the time has come for us to tell Zola and Spencer who Melchior Grime really is. After all, it's not Big Ma Kuncklebone's fault that she has an evil, greedy brother.'

Candice rubbed her tiny hands over her face. 'I do hate talking about nasty things. But you're right, Zola and Spencer are the only Ratts left now. They should know about—' Her voice tailed away and she looked helplessly at her sister.

'They should know Melchior is a ruthless enemy of this family, even though he was once a trusted servant,' said Araminta firmly. 'They

should know about the Great Ratt Hoard. And that Melchior Grime has tried to steal it. Twice.'

Candice looked at the portrait of Sir Walter on the wall. It was as if he was waiting for her to speak her mind. 'The Great Ratt Hoard,' she muttered. 'All that gold has caused nothing but trouble.'

'Quite,' agreed Araminta. 'Somehow I think the more gold our family collected—'

'*Took*…' interrupted Candice.

'The more difficult their lives became,' continued Araminta.

'Our grandmother always said that Sir Walter should have hanged Melchior Grime the last time he tried to steal it,' said Candice, in a low voice.

Araminta looked up. 'He would have, if it hadn't been for Big Ma Knucklebone. Also, he was in the middle of organising the Great Move Below, so I don't think he wanted to draw attention to himself.'

There was silence. Then Candice said in a puzzled voice, 'What ever *happened* to the Hoard?'

'I don't think we were ever told.' Araminta shrugged her little shoulders. 'But it must be *somewhere*.'

There was another *splot*! and another *pop*! and the room filled with a smell that was earthy and sickly and rotten at the same time. The sisters' noses twitched horribly.

'Candice,' said Araminta, in a hollow voice. 'Something dreadful is going to happen. I can feel it all over.'

'So can I,' whispered Candice. 'So can I!'