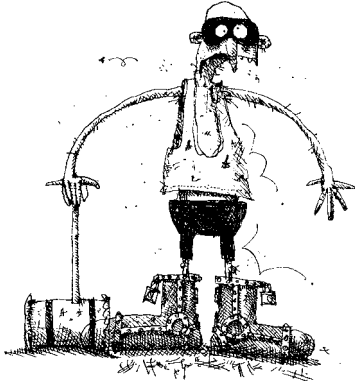




# Introducing



**Willbury Nibble**



**Herbert**



**Marjorie**



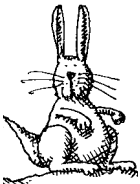
**Arthur**



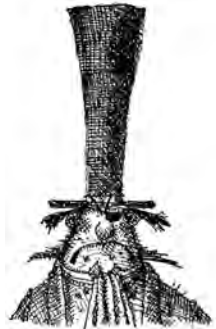
**Fish**



**Rabbit Woman**



**Rabbit**



**Snatcher**

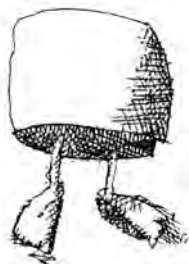
# the Characters



**Captain**



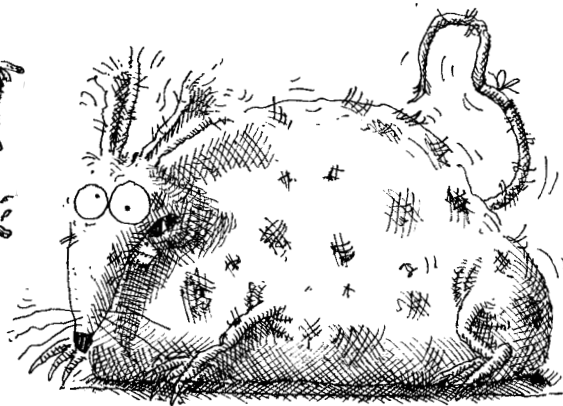
**The Members**



**Cheese**



**Grandfather**



**Framley**



**Trotting Badger**



**Crow**



**Cabbagehead**



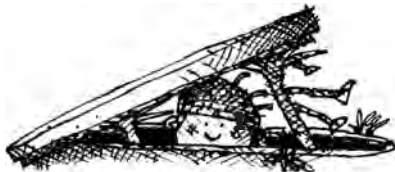
Chapter 1

# Coming Up!

**I**t 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.

In the lane that ran behind Fore Street a heavy iron drain cover set amongst the cobbles 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 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 a large vest knitted from soft rope, which 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, on 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.’

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 see you as soon as I'm done.'

Arthur replaced the doll inside his suit, then started to wind the handle on the box on his front. 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 while jumping as high as he could. Silently the wings caught the air as he leapt. 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 forward. He started to move. Arthur smiled . . . 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. 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 would not take any chances.



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 spiked gate. He crossed a deserted alley, then moved down a narrow street flanked with the windowless backs of houses. He came to 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, bathed in paths of pale light, cast from the windows of the house. Arthur saw 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 house again, then rose over the wall and headed for the greenhouse, keeping above the beams of light from the windows. He came to rest in front of the greenhouse door, turning off and folding 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, suspended from the roof, others climbing almost invisible strings. As Arthur entered he recognized tomato plants, cucumbers, and grapes hanging from above.

He made his way to a tree against the far wall, a tree with branches only at its top. Dangling from a stem below the branches was a large bunch of bananas.

Arthur could hardly contain his delight. He tore a banana from the bunch, then peeled and ate it ravenously. When he had finished, he turned and checked the house. Nothing had changed. He reached inside his under-suit and took out a string bag, then pulled eagerly at the banana bunch. It was 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. Still it 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 smash.

‘Oi! There is something in the greenhouse!’ came a shout from the house.

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.

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. Arthur groaned—the bananas gave him extra weight!

But he was not ready to put them down and fly away empty-handed—they were too precious. Still clutching the string bag in one hand, he grabbed for the knob on the front of the box with the



other, 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. 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! Give me back my bananas!' the woman cried.

Arthur grasped at the top of the wall to steady himself, adjusted the wings quickly, and made off over the wall.

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.

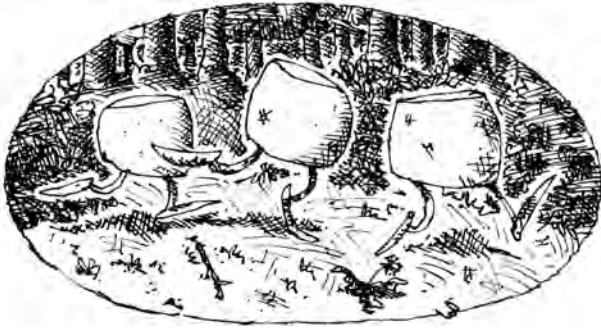
I wish we could live above ground like everybody else! he thought.

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.

Arthur landed on the bridge of the roof, and was settling himself amongst the statues when he heard a mournful bleat. He listened carefully, intrigued, but heard no more, so he stowed the bananas behind one of the statues, climbed out from his hiding place, and flew up to the plinth on the top of the roof 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.



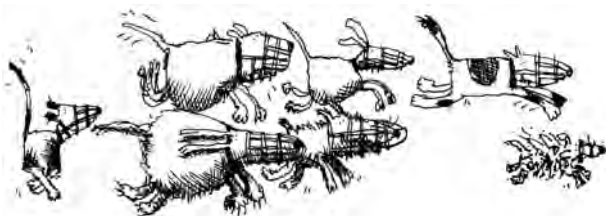
## Chapter 2

# The Hunt

**S**trange sounds were filtering through the woods—scrablblings, bleatings and growlings—and, strangest of all, a sound closely resembling bagpipes, or the sound bagpipes would make if they were being strangled, viciously, under a blanket. In a small moonlit clearing in the centre of the woods the sounds grew louder. Suddenly there was a frantic rustling in the bushes on one side of the clearing, and three large barrel cheeses broke from the undergrowth, running as fast as their legs would carry them. Hurtling across the clearing, bleating in panic, they disappeared into the bushes on the far side, and for a moment all was still again.

Suddenly a new burst of rustling came from the bushes where the cheeses had emerged, along with a horrid

growling noise. Then a pack of hounds burst out into the open, all shapes and sizes. They ran around in circles, growling through their muzzles. One small fat animal that looked like a cross between a sausage dog and a ball of wire wool kept his nose to the ground, sniffing intently. He gave a great snort, crossed the clearing, and dived onwards after the cheeses. The other hounds followed.



The weird bagpipe sound grew closer, accompanied by vaguely human cries. Then there was a louder crashing in the undergrowth and finally the strangest creature yet arrived in the clearing. It had four skinny legs that hung from what looked like an upturned boat made from a patchwork of old sacking. At its front was a head made from an old box, and on this the features of a horse's face were crudely drawn. A large angry man rode high on its back.



‘Which way did they go?’ the man screamed.

An arm emerged from the sacking and pointed across the clearing. The rider took his horn and blew, filling the clearing with the horrible bagpipe-like sound. Then he raised the horn high in the air and brought it down hard on his steed.

‘Hummgggiff Gummmminn Hoofff!’ came muffled cries of pain from below.

The creature started to move in a wobbly line across the clearing, picking up speed as the rider beat it harder. More men on these strange creatures arrived, following the sound of the horn. They were just in time to catch the lead rider disappearing. They too beat their mounts. As they did, shouts of ‘Tally-ho!’ and ‘Gee-up!’ could be heard over the cries from the beasts below.

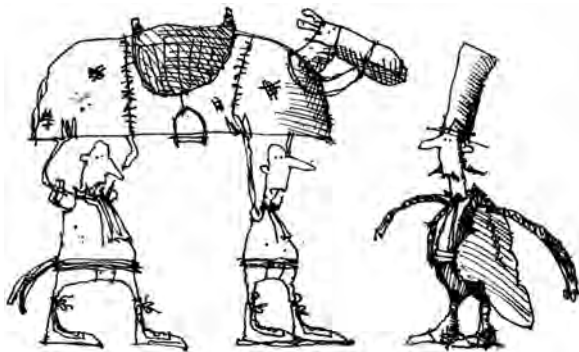
The front legs of the last of these creatures came to a sudden halt. However, the back legs kept moving and, inevitably, caught up with the front legs. There was an ‘Ooof!’ and a sweaty red face emerged from the front of the creature. The head looked up at the rider and spoke.

‘That’s it, Trout! I have had enough! I want a go on top.’

‘But I only got a “turn” since the start of the woods, and you had a long go across the fields,’ moaned the rider. Another face now emerged from the back end of the creature, and joined in.

‘Yes! . . . and Gristle, you tried to make us jump that gate!’

‘Well, I’m not going on, and I’ll blame you two if we get in trouble for getting left behind,’ said the face at the front.



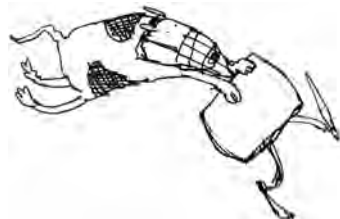
‘All right then!’ the rider said with a pout.

He jumped down, and as he took off his jacket and top hat, the creature’s body lifted to reveal two men underneath. The man at the front unstrapped himself, and the rider took his place. The body lowered itself and the new rider put on the jacket and hat, and climbed with some difficulty into the saddle.

‘Don’t you dare try going through the stream,’ the back end of the creature demanded.

‘All right, but make sure we catch up,’ said the new rider. ‘You know the rules about being last!’

The woods now disgorged a weird procession. First the cheeses, then after a few moments the hounds, followed by the huntsmen. Then the first of the cheese-hounds struck. One of the smaller cheeses was trailing a few yards behind the rest. It was an easy target. In one leap, the hound landed its front paws on the cheese. Whimpering and bleating, the cheese struggled to get free, but it was no good. Its legs buckled, and it collapsed on the grass.





### Chapter 3

# From on High

Arthur watched the cheese hunt from his perch on top of the Cheese Hall. He grabbed his doll from under his suit, and raised it to his mouth.

‘Grandfather! Grandfather! It’s Arthur. Can you hear me?’ There was a crackling and his grandfather replied.

‘Yes, Arthur, I can hear you. What’s happening?’

‘I think I can see a cheese hunt!’

There was a pause, then Grandfather spoke again. ‘Are you sure? Cheese hunting is illegal. Where are you?’

‘I am sitting on top of the Cheese Hall. I am . . . ’ Arthur decided to gloss over earlier events, ‘ . . . having a break. I can see the whole thing. Riders and hounds chasing and catching cheeses.’

‘But they can’t! It’s cruel, and illegal!’ Grandfather sputtered. ‘Are you sure there are riders on horses?’

‘Yes, Grandfather. Although there’s something rather odd about them.’

‘What is it?’

‘They’re very ungainly, and somewhat oddly shaped ...’



‘Where are they now?’ asked Grandfather.

‘They are approaching the West Gate.’

‘Well, they must be from the town then. If we could find out who was responsible, perhaps we could do something to put a stop to it. Do you think you could have a closer look without being seen?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ Arthur said, starting to feel excited.

‘Well, keep up on the roofs, and see if you can follow them.’ Grandfather paused. ‘BUT . . . be very careful!’

‘Don’t worry, I will be. I’ll call you as soon as I find out anything.’

Arthur put the doll away and wound his wings again. Here at last was a chance for some real adventure.