

20 RAT-A-TAT MYSTERY



Ernest Blyden



CHAPTER ONE

Christmas Holidays

How long do these Christmas holidays last? said Mr. Lynton, putting his newspaper down as a loud crash came from upstairs. I sometimes think Im living in a madhouse - what are those children doing upstairs? Are they practising high jumps or something?

I expect its Snubby as usual, said Mrs. Lynton. Hes supposed to be making his bed. Oh, dear - there h goes again!

She went to the door and called up the stairs. Snubby - what in the world are you doing? You are making your uncle very angry.

Oh - sorry! shouted back Snubby. I was only moving things round a bit - and the dressing-table fell over. I forgot you were underneath. Hey, look out - Loonys coming down the stairs, and hes a bit mad this morning.

A black spaniel came hurtling down the stairs at top speed and Mrs. Lynton hurriedly got out of the way. Loony slid all the way along the hall and in at the sitting-room door almost to Mr. Lyntons feet. He was most surprised to receive a smart slap on the head from Mr. Lyntons folded newspaper. He shot out of the door almost as fast as he had come in.

What a house! groaned Mr. Lynton, as his wife came back. As soon as Snubby arrives peace and quiet vanish. He makes Diana and Roger three times as bad, too - as for that dog Loony, hes even more of a lunatic than usual.

Never mind, dear - after all, Christmas only comes once a year, said Mrs. Lynton. And poor old Snubby must have somewhere to go in the holidays - you forget he has no father or mother.

Well, I wish he wasnt my nephew, said Mr. Lynton. And WHY must we have his dog Loony every time we have Snubby?

Oh, Richard - you know Snubby wouldnt come here if we didnt have Loony - he adores Loony, said his wife.

Ha! said Mr. Lynton, opening his newspaper again. So Snubby wont go anywhere without Loony - well, tell him next holidays we wont have that dog here - then perhaps Snubby wont inflict himself on us!

Oh, you dont really mean that, dear, said Mrs. Lynton. Snubby just gets on your nerves when youre home for a few days. Youll be back at the office soon.

Upstairs Snubby was sitting on his unmade bed, talking to his cousins, Diana and Roger, and fondling Loonys long silky ears. They had come to see what the terrific crashes were.

You'll get into a row with Dad, said Roger. You never will remember that your room is over the sitting-room. ~~Whatever do you want to go and lug the furniture about for?~~

Well, I didn't really mean to move it, said Snubby. But a sixpence went under the chest-of-drawers, and when I moved it out I thought it would look better where the dressing-table is, but the beastly thing went over with a crash.

You're going to get a whacking from Dad pretty soon, said Diana. I heard him say you were working up for one. You really are an ass, Snubby. Dad goes back to the office soon. Why can't you behave till then?

I do behave! said Snubby indignantly. Anyway, who spilt the coffee all over the breakfast-table this morning? Not me!

Roger and Diana stared at their red-haired freckle-faced cousin, and he stared back at them out of his green eyes. They were both fond of the irrepressible Snubby, but, really, he could be very irritating at times. Diana gave an impatient exclamation.

Well, I don't wonder Dad gets tired of you, Snubby! You and Loony rush about the house like a hurricane - and WHY can't you teach Loony to stop taking shoes and brushes from people's bedrooms? Did you know he's taken Dad's clothes-brush this morning? Goodness knows how he got it off the dressing-table.

Oh, golly! Has he really? said Snubby, getting off the bed in a hurry. There'll be another explosion from Uncle Richard when he discovers that. I'll go and find it.

Christmas had been a mad and merry time in the Lyntons house. All the children had come home from school in high spirits, looking forward to plenty of good food, presents and jollifications. Snubby had been a little subdued at first, because he was afraid that his school report might be even worse than usual, and his uncle and aunt had been pleasantly surprised to find him most polite and helpful.

But this wore off after a few days, and Snubby had now become his usual riotous, ridiculous self, aided in every way by his black spaniel, Loony. His uncle had quickly become very tired of him, especially since Snubby had forgotten to turn off the tap in the bathroom and flooded the floor. If it hadn't been Christmas time Snubby would certainly have got a first-class whacking!

All the same, everyone had enjoyed Christmas, though the children wished there had been snow.

It doesn't seem like Christmas without snow, complained Snubby.

Oh, well get plenty as soon as Christmas is gone, said Mrs. Lynton. We always do. Then you can go out the whole day long, and snowball and toboggan and skate - and I shall be rid of you for a little while!

But there had been no snow yet, only a drizzling rain that kept the children indoors for most of the time, much to Mr. Lynton's annoyance. Why must they always talk at the tops of their voices? he said in exasperation. And is there any need to have the radio on so loudly? And will someone tell that dog Loony that if I fall over him again he can go and live out of doors in the shed?

But it wasn't really any good telling Loony things like that. If he wanted to sit down and scratch himself, he sat down, no matter whether someone was coming along to trip over him or not. Even Snubby couldn't make him stop. Loony just looked up with his melting spaniel eyes, thumped his little tail, and then went on scratching.

I don't know why you scratch! said Snubby, in exasperation. Pretending you've got fleas! You know you haven't, Loony. Oh, get up, do!

One rainy morning Diana was mooning about, getting in her busy mother's way. Oh, Diana, dear - do get something to do! said Mrs. Lynton. Have you done all your morning jobs - made your bed, dusted your room, done the -

Yes, Mother - everything, said Diana. I really have. Do you want me to help you?

Well, will you take down all the Christmas cards? said her mother. It's time they were down. Stack them neatly in a big cardboard box, so that we can send them to Aunt Lucy - she makes scrap-books of them for children in hospital.

Right! said Diana. Oh, there's Snubby with his mouth-organ. Mother, doesn't he play it well?

No, he doesn't, said her mother. He makes a simply horrible noise with it. Let him do the cards with you, then perhaps he'll put it down and forget it. I really do believe your father will go mad if Snubby wanders round the house playing his mouth-organ.

Snubby, come and help with the Christmas cards, called Diana. Look out, Mother - Loony's coming down the stairs.

Christmas cards? What do you mean? said Snubby, coming into the room. Oh - take them down? Right! oh! It's always fun to look at them again. Let's put all the funny ones into a pile.

He and Diana were soon happily taking down the gay cards. They read each one and laughed at the funny ones, stacking them all neatly into a box.

Oh, here's the one Barney sent us! said Diana. Look - isn't it marvellous! Just like old Barney too.

She held up a big card, on the front of which was a picture of a fair ground. Drawn neatly in one corner was a boy with a monkey on his shoulder.

Barney's drawn himself and Miranda on the card, said Diana. Snubby, I wonder how he enjoyed Christmas-time with his family for the very first time in his life!

Roger came into the room just then, and took up Barney's card too. Good old Barney! he said. I wish we could see him these hols. I say - wasn't it MARVELLOUS how he found his father - and discovered that he had a whole family of his own?

Yes, said Diana, remembering. He spent all his life in a circus with his mother, and thought his father was dead. And when his mother died, she told him his father was still alive, and he must find him....

And he went out to seek for his father, and hunted everywhere, said Roger. And do you remember how

at last he met him - last hols, it was, at Rubadub, that dear little seaside place where we were holidaying - and what an awfully nice man he was, exactly like Barney...

Oh, yes, said Diana, remembering it all clearly. And then dear old Barney discovered that he hadnt only a father, but a grandfather and grandmother and an uncle and aunts....

And cousins! finished Snubby. Gosh, what a wonderful Christmas Barney must have had. I bet hes forgotten all about us now!

I bet he hasnt! said Diana at once. I say - Ive got a smashing idea! Lets ask Mother if we can have Barney to stay for a few days! Then well hear all his news.

And well see Miranda, his pet monkey, again, said Snubby, thrilled. Do you hear that, Loony? Well see Miranda!

Come on - lets go and ask Mother this very minute! said Diana, and flew out of the room. Mother! Mother! Where are you?

CHAPTER TWO

Barney

The three children raced upstairs to find Mrs. Lynton. Loony went with them, almost tripping them up as he was so anxious to get to the top of the stairs first. He barked as he went, sensing the children's excitement and wanting to join in.

Mr. Lynton, trying to write letters in his room, groaned loudly. That dog! I really will have him kept out of doors if he goes on like this!

Mother! We've got such a good idea! said Diana, finding her mother putting clean towels into the bathroom.

Have you, dear? said her mother. Snubby, could you tell me HOW you get your towel as black as this? You haven't been climbing chimneys by any chance, have you?

Ha-ha! Funny joke! said Snubby, politely.

Oh, Mother, do listen. We've got a splendid idea! said Diana again.

Yes! Can we have Barney to stay for a few days, Mother? said Roger, going straight to the point. Do say yes! You like Barney, don't you?

And we haven't seen him since the summer holidays, said Diana. Not since he found his father and all his new family, and went to live with them.

And we simply MUST see him, said Snubby, snatching the bathmat away from Loony, who was shaking it as if it were a rat.

Well, dears, began Mrs. Lynton, looking most uncertain. Well... I really don't know what to say.

Oh, why? Why can't we ask Barney - and Miranda too, of course? said Diana, astonished. You always liked him, Mother, you know you did.

Yes, dear, and I do still, said her mother. But I don't feel that Daddy will welcome anyone else here while you are all three turning the house upside-down, and -

Oh, we don't turn it upside-down! cried Diana. Haven't I been tidying things all the morning? Oh, Mother, well be as quiet and tidy as anything if you'll let Barney come. We simply must hear his news before we go back to school again.

Well, you must ask Daddy, Diana, said her mother. If he says yes, Barney shall certainly come. I'll leave it entirely to him.

Oh, said Diana, looking gloomy. Can't you ask him, Mother?

No, said her mother. Stop turning on the taps, Snubby. I said stop. And take Loony out of the bathroom please. Hell have that sponge next, out of the bath-rack.

Come on, Loony, said Snubby, in a sorrowful voice. Were not wanted here. Well go and have a game together in the garage.

No, you wont, said Roger firmly. Youll come and back us up when we ask Daddy if we can have Barney.

I cant, said Snubby. Uncle said he didnt want to set eyes on me again this morning. Or Loony either.

Oh, well - you come, Di, and well tackle Dad together, said Roger. And for goodness sake, Snubby, dont start playing your mouth-organ outside the study door just when were inside.

Loony shot down the stairs at top speed as usual, followed by Snubby three steps at a time. Mrs. Lynton shook her head and smiled to herself - nobody, NOBODY would ever teach Snubby and Loony not to hurl themselves downstairs.

Mr. Lynton heard a discreet knock on his study door and raised his head from his letters. Come in! he said, and in came Diana and Roger.

What is it? asked their father. Surely you dont want any pocket-money yet, after all the money you had given to you at Christmas?

No, Dad, no, said Roger hurriedly. We shouldnt dream of asking you for any yet. Er - we just wondered if - er - well, we thought it would be nice if -

Nice, and kind too, said Diana. If we - er - if Barney could -

What is all this? said her father impatiently. Cant you ask a straight question?

Well, we wondered if Barney could come to stay for a few days, said Diana, bringing it all out in a rush. You remember Barney, dont you, Dad? The circus-boy we got to know so well.

Yes, I remember him, said Mr. Lynton. Nice boy - very blue eyes - and didnt he have a monkey?

Yes, Dad! said Roger eagerly. Miranda - a perfect darling. Could we have them to stay?

Ask your mother, said her father.

We have, said Roger, and she says were to ask you.

Then I say No, said Mr. Lynton firmly. And Im pretty certain your mother really wants to say No as well - youre all wearing her out these holidays! Also, Ive got your Great-Uncle Robert coming for three days, and Ive really been wondering if I cant send Snubby and Loony off to Aunt Agatha while Great-Uncle is here - I dont feel that the old gentleman will be able to cope with the three of you - and that mad dog Loony too.

Oh, Dad! You didnt ask Great-Uncle in the Christmas holidays, surely! cried Diana. He talks and talks

and talks, and we darent say a word, and -

Perhaps thats why I asked him! said her father, a sudden twinkle in his eye. No - actually the old fellow asked himself. He hasnt been well - which is why Im sure he cant cope with Snubby and Loony - and the mouth-organ.

Oh, said Diana sadly. Well, its no good asking Barney then - there wouldnt be room, for one thing. Or and I did so want to see him these hols - and now we shant see him for ages. Couldnt you possibly put Great-Uncle off, Dad?

No, I couldnt, said her father. And even if I did, I wouldnt have Barney here - one more to add to the madhouse! And you might warn Snubby he may have to go to his Aunt Agathas soon.

Snubby was horrified at this news. But I dont like being there! he said. Loony has to live in a kennel and I have to wash at least twenty times a day! I say, I wont play my mouth-organ any more. And Ill stop whistling. And Ill tiptoe down the stairs, and -

Ass! said Roger. That would only make Mother think you were ill, or sickening for something! Blow All our plans made for nothing!

And we shant see Barney now, said Diana. Or that darling little Miranda.

I say, said Snubby suddenly, look - its snowing!

They ran to the window and looked out. Yes, big snowflakes were falling steadily down. Diana looked up at the sky, but the snowflakes were already so thick that they hid it completely.

If it goes on like this, well have some fun, said Roger, feeling more cheerful. And when Great-Uncle comes to stay we can keep out of his way all day long - well be out in the snow, tobogganing!

And skating, if theres any ice, said Diana, thrilled.

But I shant be here! said Snubby, in such a desperate voice that the others laughed. I shall be with my Aunt Agatha and Uncle Horace, with poor old Loony howling by himself out in his kennel.

Poor Snubby. Never mind. Perhaps Great-Uncle wont come, said Diana.

But the next day there was a letter from Great-Uncle announcing that he was arriving in two days time. Snubby looked at his aunt in despair. Would he be sent away? He was ready to promise anything rather than that. Especially as the snow was now beautifully thick and deep, and the ponds had begun to freeze. There would be no tobogganing or skating at his Aunt Agathas, he knew that.

But Mrs. Lynton was quite firm. If Great-Uncle Robert was not very well, then the worst thing in the world for him would be a dose of Snubby and Loony. He might even have a heart-attack at some of the things Loony did.

I must telephone to your Aunt Agatha at once, she said. Dont look like that, Snubby - the world isnt coming to an end.

She went into the hall to telephone - and almost as she touched the receiver, the shrill bell rang out. Ring-ring! Ring-ring! Ring-ring!

I hope its to say Great-Uncle cant come! cried Snubby. But it wasnt. Mrs. Lynton turned round, smiling. Who do you think wants to speak to you? she said. Its Barney!

Barney! cried everyone, and they all rushed to the telephone. Roger grabbed the receiver first. Barney Is it really you! Did you have a good Christmas?

Then he listened to Barneys reply - and suddenly a look of utter delight came over his face. Oh, BARNEY! What a wonderful idea! Yes, Ill ask Mother - hold on. Ill ask her straight away!

Snubby and Diana could hardly wait for him to ask his mother whatever it was that Barney wanted to know.

Mother! said Roger, Barney and one of his cousins are going to stay at a house his grandmother owns by a little lake surrounded by hills - the lake is frozen and the hills are covered with snow - so there will be tobogganing and skating. And he says, can we go too?

There were shrieks of delight from Diana and Snubby. Of course well go, of course!

Barney says, if you say yes, his grandmother will telephone all the arrangements to you, said Roger, his eyes shining. Oh, Mother - its all right, isnt it? We can go to stay with Barney, instead of him coming here - and Snubby wont have to go to his Aunt Agathas - and Great-Uncle Robert can come here in peace, without any of us to worry him. Oh, Mother - we can go, cant we?

CHAPTER THREE

An Exciting Invitation

Mrs. Lynton looked at the three eager children, and nodded her head, smiling round at them.

Yes. I dont see why you shouldnt. In fact, I think it's an excellent way of solving all our difficulties. Oh, Snubby, dear, DONT!

Snubby had caught hold of his aunt and was waltzing her round and round in delight, shouting, Hip-hip-hip, hurray, its a hap-hap-happy day!

Mr. Lynton came out into the hall in surprise, and was told what the excitement was about. He listened with approval.

Ha! That will give your Great-Uncle a little peace and quiet - and us too, he said. I hope youre not going to leave Loony behind. I really should like to see the back of that dog for a little while.

You will, you will! shouted Snubby, approaching his uncle to give him a waltz-round too, he was so very relieved. But fortunately he thought better of this - his uncle did not take kindly to such idiotic manners.

Roger was already telling Barney of his parents consent, and getting a few more details. Diana snatched the receiver from him after a minute or two, longing to have a word with dear old Barney. A little chattering noise greeted her.

Oh, is that you, Miranda! she cried, enchanted to hear the familiar monkey-chatter once more. Well be seeing you soon, Miranda, soon, soon, soon.

Woof, woof! said Loony, not understanding what was going on at all, and quite amazed at all the excitement. He tried to tug the mat from Mr. Lyntons feet and run off with it, but Snubby stopped him just in time.

Everyone was thrilled to hear from Barney. After Snubby had had a few words on the telephone with him too, the receiver was put down and they all trooped into the sitting-room to talk over the exciting news.

Fancy - a house in the middle of the snowy hills - and by a frozen lake too - it couldnt be better! said Roger exultantly. I must look out my skates. Youre lucky, Snubby, you had new ones for Christmas.

What about our toboggan? said Diana. I dont believe its any good for us now - too small. We havent used it for about three years. Blow!

Ill buy a new one with my Christmas money, boasted Snubby. Oh, I say - I wish I could buy skates for Loony!

Roger laughed. I wish you could. Loony would look priceless on skates - ho wouldnt know which skate to use first!

Oh, its too good to be true! said Diana, sinking into a chair. Mother, you dont mind us going, do you? You wont be lonely, will you?

Dear me, no, said her mother. I shall be glad to have time to devote to your Great-Uncle. Thank goodness Loony wont be here. When is Barney's grandmother going to telephone about the day and time and other arrangements, Roger. Did Barney say?

Yes. Shell phone to-night, said Roger. He turned to the others. Barney sounded exactly the same, didnt he? he said.

Exactly, agreed the others.

But why shouldnt he? said Mrs. Lynton, surprised.

Oh, I dont know, said Roger. After being a circus-boy so long - with ragged clothes and often hardly enough to eat - and no schooling to speak of - and then finding a whole new family, and having to have lessons - and decent clothes and table-meals instead of camping out - well, somehow I thought he might have changed.

Barney will never change, said Snubby. Never. I say - think of tobogganning down steep hills - whoooooosh! He slid at top speed over the polished floor, and stopped when he saw his aunts face. And skating round and round - and in and out....

He skated into a little table and Diana just caught it as it fell. Dont be more of an idiot than you can help! she said. I bet youll fall down a thousand times before you can skate even half a dozen steps. He - Im looking forward to seeing you sitting down bump on the ice!

Barneys grandmother telephoned to Mrs. Lynton that evening. She had a kind, very soft voice, and Mrs. Lynton thought how lucky Barney was to have a grandmother who sounded so nice. She told the waiting children what the old lady had arranged.

She says that this house in the hills has been shut up for some time, said Mrs. Lynton. Her sons and daughters used to use it for winter sports when they were young. She is sending someone to clean it up and air it, and it should be ready for you to go to in two days time.

Is any grown-up going with them? asked Mr. Lynton. They must have someone sensible there.

Barneys very sensible, said Snubby, at once.

Mrs. Martin - thats Barneys grandmother - says she is sending her cooks sister to look after them, said Mrs. Lynton. She will cook for them, and dry their clothes, and see that they dont do anything too idiotic. But I hope Roger will see to that, as well. Hes quite old enough to take charge, with Barney.

Well be all right, said Roger. You neednt worry, Mother. My word - only two days and well be down at this little house!

It doesnt sound very little, said his mother. There are five or six bedrooms, and a big old kitchen, and two or three other rooms. Youll have to help to keep it tidy, or the cooks sister will walk off and leave you!

Ill help her, promised Diana. And we can all make our beds - though all Snubby does is simply to get out of his in the morning and pull the sheets and blankets up again.

Tell-tale, said Snubby at once. Its my bed, isnt it?

I think tomorrow wed better look into the question of skates and boots and clothes, said Mrs. Lynton. And you will all need good wellingtons, of course. I hope youve brought yours back from school, Snubby. You forgot them last term.

Yes, I brought them back. Anyhow, I quite well remember bringing one back, said Snubby, helpfully.

Whats the house called? asked Diana.

Well - I think I must have heard it wrongly over the telephone, said her mother; but it sounded like Rat-a-Tat House.

Everyone laughed. How lovely! said Diana. I hope that is its name. Rat-a-Tat House - why ever was it called that, I wonder?

Next day was a busy one. Boots, socks, gloves, sweaters, skates - all were pulled out and carefully examined. The weather remained very cold and frosty, and snow fell again in the night. The forecast was cold weather, much snow, and hard frost - just right for winter sports, as Snubby kept announcing. He produced his mouth-organ once more, and nearly drove everyone mad by trying to learn a new tune. In the end Mrs. Lynton took it away and packed it at the very bottom of one of the suit-cases that were going with them.

But, not to be outdone, Snubby then went about pretending to strum on a banjo, and made a peculiar twanging noise with his mouth half-closed as he strummed an imaginary banjo with his fingers and thumb. This was really worse than the mouth-organ, and unfortunately, as the banjo was purely imaginary, it could not be taken away from him.

Cant that boy be sent to Rat-a-Tat House to-day? demanded Mr. Lynton, hearing the banjo passing his door for the twentieth time that morning. My word, its a good thing he wont be here when Great-Uncle Robert comes.

At last the suit-cases were all packed, the skates strung together, and clothes set out fresh for the next morning, when they were to join Barney. Loony rushed about eagerly all the time, trying to help, and making off with shoes and bundles of socks whenever they were put ready to pack. Even Snubby got bit tired of him when he met Loony rushing up the stairs, just as he, Snubby, was rushing down, and both arrived in a bruised and tangled heap at the bottom.

Ass of a dog! said Snubby fiercely to the surprised Loony. Ill leave you behind if you do that again. I nearly broke my leg. Grrrrrrr! Bad dog!

Loony put his tail down and crept under the hall chest. There was a smell of mouse there, and he had

wonderful time scrabbling round and round to find it, snuffling loudly all the time, much to Mr. Lyntons amazement.

Were to go to Barneys home first, and then go on with him and his cousin to Rat-a-Tat House, said Roger to the others. I wish tomorrow would come. I say - I wonder what the cousins like. Mother, how long can we stay away?

Till the snows gone, I should think, said his mother. Thats what Barneys grandmother said. But, of course, if it lasts more than a week or so, youll have to come back because of getting ready for school again.

Roger groaned. Dont mention the word! Snubby, STOP that noise. Or play another instrument for a change. That imaginary banjo of yours is getting boring.

Snubby obligingly changed over to a zither, which was certainly much pleasanter. He really was a marvel at imitating sounds. Mrs. Lynton hoped he wouldnt start on a drum next!

The morning came at last - a brilliant morning, with a clear blue sky and pale yellow sun - and the snow underfoot as crisp as sugar. Heavenly! said Diana. Just exactly right for us!

Off they went in a taxi to catch the train to Barneys town, Loony too, so excited that he had to be put on the lead. Now for a good time - now for some sport - hurrah for the winter holidays!

CHAPTER FOUR

At Barneys Home

Barneys home was at Little Wendleman, and a car was at Wendleman station to meet them - a nice b utility van with plenty of room for luggage. Best of all, Barney was there to meet them too, with Miranda sitting excitedly on his shoulder.

Barney! Old Barney! And Miranda; hey, Miranda! shouted Snubby, hanging out of the compartment window as the train drew in. He opened the door and he and Loony fell out together. Barney ran up in delight, his brilliant blue eyes shining as brightly as ever. Miranda, the little monkey, leapt up and down on his shoulder and chattered at the top of her voice. She knew everyone immediately.

Barney! Dear old Barney! said Diana, and gave him a hug. Roger clapped him on the back, and Snubby grinned all over his freckled, snub-nosed face. As for Loony, he went completely mad, lay on his back and did one of his bicycling acts at top speed, barking loudly.

Hallo! said Barney, his brown face glowing with pleasure at seeing the children who had befriended him when he was a down-at-heel circus-boy. Gosh - its grand to see you all again. Isnt it, Miranda?

The little monkey leapt on to Dianas shoulder and whispered in her ear, holding the lobe in her paw the way she often did. Diana laughed. Darling Miranda - you havent changed a bit, not a bit. And you do look smart in your little red coat and bonnet and skirt!

Barney looked different. He was no taller and no fatter, and his face was as brown as ever. But now he was dressed well, his hair was cut properly, and he wore a tie, which he had rarely done when he had been a circus-boy. In fact, he looked extremely nice, and Diana gazed at him in admiration.

Barney laughed, as he saw the eyes of all three on him. Do I look diferent? he said, in the voice they knew so well, with the slight American twang he had picked up in his circus travels. Im not a circus-boy any more - Im a gentleman - whew - think of that! Me, Barney the hoop-la boy, the boy who took any job he could, who never wore anything but canvas shoes, dirty old trousers, and a ragged shirt...

He paused and twinkled round at the three listening children. Yes, Im a gentleman now - but Im still the same, see? Im just Barney - arent I, Miranda?

Miranda leapt on to his shoulder again and jiggged up and down, chattering in monkey-language. What did she care how Barney was dressed, or where he lived, or whether he was a circus-boy or a gentleman? It was all the same to her. He was just Barney.

Yes, youre still just Barney, said Diana, and gave a little sigh of relief. She had wondered just a little if having a family, and a fine house and money to spend would have changed Barney - but no, it hadn

Come on, said Barney. The cars here, see, and theres my father driving it. He said the words my father in a very proud voice. Diana felt touched. How very, very glad Barney must be to have a father of his

own, and to have found him after so many years of thinking he was dead!

Barneys father, Mr. Martin, was sitting at the wheel of the car. The children marvelled at the likeness between the two - bright blue, wide-set eyes, corn-coloured hair, a wide mouth, ready to smile. Yes, they were certainly father and son. The only real difference between their faces was that Barneys was so much browner than his fathers.

Hallo, kids! said Mr. Martin, and smiled, looking more like Barney than ever. Nice of you to come all this way to see Barnabas - or Barney, as you call him. Hop in! Were to have lunch at his grandmothers, and then Ill take you to Rat-a-Tat House.

Thank you very much, sir, said Roger politely. Its good of you to meet us like this - and jolly good of Barneys grandmother to invite us to stay with him at Rat-a-Tat House. Were thrilled.

The boys piled the suit-cases into the utility van. Loony clambered in, and sat up in a corner so that he could look out of the window. He loved hanging his head out of a car, his long ears flapping in the breeze. He was delighted to see Barney again, though he wasnt so sure about Miranda the monkey. He had suddenly remembered how she used to ride on his back, jiggling up and down in a most aggravating manner. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Would she try that old trick again?

The car drew up in the drive of a pleasant-looking house, timbered, with white walls, tall chimneys and wide casement windows. As they drew up, the front door flew open, and a little old lady stood there, as brown-eyed as the monkey that sat on her shoulder.

Ah, here you are! she cried. Welcome, welcome! Ive longed to meet dear Barneys friends. Come along in, come along in!

The children liked Barneys grandmother at once. She had curly white hair, a very pink, soft-cheeked face, brown eyes, and a lively smile. They smiled to see the monkey on her shoulder as they shook hands.

Ah - you see I have a monkey just like Barnabas! she said in a merry, bird-like voice. Monkeys run in our family - my mother kept two. Jinny, here are good friends!

Jinny, the little monkey, was not dressed like Miranda. She wore a little yellow cape round her thin shoulders. She held out a tiny, wizened paw in a very solemn manner and shook hands with each of them. Loony stared in astonishment at her. What - another monkey - or was he seeing double?

Soon they were all sitting in a cosy room, with a blazing fire, gay curtains and a lovely meal laid ready on a round table. Snubby looked at it approvingly. Hot tomato soup to begin with - now that was just what he felt like! He took his place at once and beamed round. This was the kind of thing Snubby enjoyed.

What comes next? he asked Barney, in a loud whisper.

Ah - Barnabas has told me what you like, said the old lady, who had very sharp ears. Sausages - plenty of them - and fried onions and tomatoes - and potatoes and peas. Barnabas has had many a meal with you, I know - and now I am proud you should have a meal with him.

Snubby thought this sounded fine. What a nice old lady. Barney was certainly lucky to have such a splendid family belonging to him. For a second Snubby was just a little jealous when he looked at Barneys handsome, smiling father. He would have liked a father like that - but he had no parents at all. Worse luck. Snubby simply couldn't understand children who grumbled at their parents - they didn't know how lucky they were to have them!

It was a very pleasant meal. Barney told them all about the lessons he had had during the last term. He had never been to school, and his father had thought he must have plenty of private coaching before he sent him anywhere. The boy was very intelligent, and enjoyed his lessons immensely.

He's as good at them as he is at walking the tight-rope or turning cart wheels! said his father, with a laugh.

How marvellous! said Snubby, enviously. I'm no good at either! Barney - do you ever miss the circuses and fairs and shows you used to belong to?

Sometimes, said Barney. Not often. But just at times I think of what fun it was sleeping out under the stars - or having a tasty meal out of some cook-pot in a fair when I was very hungry - and I miss the show people a bit.

You can always go off for a taste of that life again, whenever you want to, Barney, said his father, smiling at him.

I know, said Barney. But I shall always come back home - come back here to you and Granny. I like the freedom of the show-life - but I like putting out roots too, as I can here. That feeling of belonging somewhere - to a place or a family - that's what I've missed all my life, and now I've got it, I'm going to keep it.

The talk went on during the meal, happy, jolly talk, friendly and intimate. Loony lay beneath the table, amazed at the variety of titbits that came down to him from Snubby, Roger and Barney. Miranda, curious to see why Loony was so peaceful, slid down a table leg to investigate, and joined in Loony's little feast, much to his annoyance. Jinny, the other monkey, seldom left her mistress's shoulder, and gravely took little titbits in her tiny paw. Sometimes she patted the soft old cheek near to her, and often did what Miranda did to Barney - slid a small paw down her mistress's neck to warm her tiny fingers.

Now, after lunch, the car will take you all to Rat-a-Tat House, said Barneys grandmother. Mrs. Tickle, the cook's sister, is already there.

Mrs. Tickle - is that really her name? asked Snubby. Is she ticklish?

I have no idea, said Mrs. Martin. And if I were you I wouldn't try to find out.

I thought a cousin of Barneys was coming too, said Roger. Where is he? Are we going to pick him up somewhere?

No. He has started a cold, said Mrs. Martin. He may be along in a day or two, but not to-day. You'll have to settle in without him.

This pleased everyone very much. They badly wanted to have a long, friendly talk with old Barney, and a strange cousin would have embarrassed them.

They piled into the utility van, and waved good-bye to Barneys grandmother and little Jinny, the monkey. Then away they drove over the snowy roads towards the white-clad hills.

Wake me up at Rat-a-Tat House, said Snubby, suddenly feeling sleepy after his enormous lunch. What fun were going to have there!

Youre right, Snubby - you just wait and see!

CHAPTER FIVE

Rat-a-Tat House

The car had to go slowly along some of the roads because they were already slippery. It took about an hour to reach the little village of Boffame, which was two or three miles from Rat-a-Tat House.

Now we shall soon be there, said Barneys father, who was at the wheel. My word, we had some fun at Rat-a-Tat House when I was a boy, and played there with my brother and sisters and cousins. Youll have fun too, Barnabas, with your friends.

They went through the little village, and then up a small, very steep hill. The car stopped half-way up and would not go on. Its wheels slid round and round in the same slippery place.

Get the sacks out and the spade, children, said Mr. Martin. I thought this might happen, so weve come prepared!

They got the spade and dug away the snow under the wheels, slipping the sacks beneath them instead. Then Mr. Martin started up the car again, the wheels gripped the sacks instead of the slippery snow, and the car slowly reached the top of the hill. It stopped and Mr. Martin waited for the children to come along to the car with the sacks and spade.

Its a good thing I took all the goods yesterday that youll need at Rat-a-Tat House, he said. I doubt if a car will be able to get through if we have any more snow.

Perhaps we shall be cut off from everywhere! said Snubby in delight. Lost in the snowy hills. Marooned in Rat-a-Tat House. We shant be able to go back to school. Hurrah!

Loony barked joyfully. If anyone said hurrah it meant they were happy, so he had to join in too. Miranda leaned across the car and tweaked one of his long ears, and there was a scrimmage immediately. Mr. Martin looked round for a moment. I dont know whats happening at the back, but its most disturbing to the driver, he remarked, and Loony at once got a smack from Snubby, and yelped in surprise.

The car went slowly on. They came to another hill - would the car stick half-way up this time? No, it went up steadily and everyone gave a sigh of relief.

The countryside looked enchanting in its thick blanket of dazzling white snow. Every little twig was outlined in white, and every sharp outline of fence or roof was softened by the snow. Diana looked out of the window and thought how beautiful it was.

Well have marvellous tobogganing, said Roger. Best weve ever had. And plenty of skating if the frosts holds.

Its sure to, said Barneys father, driving the car down into a little valley surrounded by snow-clad hills.

on every side. Now were nearly there - youll see Rat-a-Tat House in a minute - its round this corner. Ah, theres the frozen lake, look.

Oh, its quite a big lake! said Diana, surprised. What a pity we cant go boating and swimming, as well as skating.

Everyone laughed. Rather impossible, said Barneys father. Perhaps you can come again in the summer and have some fun here with Barney and his cousins then.

So this is the house, said Snubby, in approval, as they swung in at a small drive. Ha - I like it! Its - its rather odd looking, isnt it? All those turrets and towers and tucked-in windows and things.

Its old, said Mr. Martin; but was so very sturdily built that it has lasted well for a great many years. I seen a bit of history too. Oliver Cromwell once stayed here, and it is said that a celebrated Spaniard, who was taken prisoner, was brought here and hidden - and what is more, was never heard of again.

Gosh! said Snubby, thrilled. I hope he isnt still there. I cant speak a word of Spanish. I like the look of Rat-a-Tat House. I feel as if plenty of exciting things have happened here.

As they swung slowly up the drive, the front door opened, and someone stood there smiling at them - a very small woman with plaits of dark hair wound round her head, and merry dark eyes. She wore a flowered overall, and over it a spotless white apron. The children liked her at once.

Is that Mrs. Tickle? asked Snubby, leaping out of the car before anyone else.

Yes, said Barney. But dont ask her if shes ticklish, because hundreds of people have asked that already and shes tired of it. Hallo, Mrs. Tickle! I hope you havent been lonely.

Not a bit, Ive been too busy! said the little woman, coming to help with the suit-cases. Are you cold? Come away in, then, Ive a fine fire for you. Good afternoon, Mr. Martin, sir - Im right down glad to see you all, I was afeard youd not get through the snow.

We were only stuck once, said Mr. Martin. Ill just see the children in safely, Mrs. Tickle, and then I must go, because I want to get away before more snow falls. It looks as if the sky is full of it again.

Thats right, sir, you get home before its dark, said little Mrs. Tickle. Oh, my word, whos this?

It was Loony, prancing round in the snow, getting into everyones way as usual.

I didnt know you were bringing a dog, said Mrs. Tickle. Ive got no dog biscuits for him.

Oh, he doesnt mind having what we have, Snubby assured her. He loves a slice off the joint or a chop

Mrs. Tickle looked quite horrified. He wont get anything like that while Im in charge! she said, leading them all indoors. I like dogs to be kept in their place. And monkeys too, she said, with a look at Miranda sitting on Barney's shoulder. Well, here you are - sit down and warm yourselves!

She led them into a big, panelled room, at one end of which was an enormous fireplace with a fire of logs, crackling and blazing.

Oh, its lovely! said Diana, glancing all round. Its like a house in a story book. And how light the room is!

Thats the reflection of the snow outside, said Mrs. Tickle. Bless us all, whats the matter with that dog

Loony was growling in a most peculiar manner, and backing away from the fireplace, towards which he had run for warmth. Barney gave a bellow of laughter.

Hes just seen the bearskin rug in front of the fire! Its got a bears head at one end and he thinks its rea

Certainly poor Loony had had a terrible shock! He had run towards the fire, and had suddenly seen the bears head at the end of the rug, its two glass eyes shining balefully at him. Loony imagined that the bear was crouching down ready to spring, and had backed away at once, producing his fiercest growls

Idiot, said Snubby. Look at Miranda - shes braver than you are, Loony!

Miranda had also seen the bear - but she had seen bearskin rugs before and was not at all worried. She leapt down and sat on the bears head, chattering away at Loony, and jiggling up and down.

Shes telling you not to be such a coward, Loony, said Snubby, severely. Really, Im ashamed of you!

Well, children, Mrs. Tickle will take you all round the house and show you your rooms, said Barneys father, looking at his watch. And no doubt she has a fine tea waiting. Help her all you can, please. Barney, you are in charge here, remember, and if anything goes wrong, let me know at once.

Yes, sir, said Barney. I suppose Rat-a-Tat House is on the telephone?

Yes, said his father. So youll be quite all right. Mrs. Tickle knows where the toboggans are, and your skates - we brought them here when we drove her over with all the food and bedclothes and so on. Well, have a good time. Mrs. Tickle, keep them in order - and dont stand any nonsense.

Ill keep them in order all right, sir, said little Mrs. Tickle, looking quite fierce. Then she smiled. Ill enjoy having them round me, she said. Mine are all grown up now, and it will be like old times to have them rampaging round. I hope you get back all right, sir.

They all went to see Mr. Martin off in the car. It was getting dark already, though the gleaming snow threw its white light everywhere. Good-bye! shouted everyone, and waved till the car had crawled out of the gate.

They all went back into the fire-lit sitting-room, with its wide window-seats, its enormous fireplace, and gleaming old furniture. Snubby stood by the fire, rubbing his hands in glee.

Isnt this smashing? he said. I wish we could go out into the snow now, and toboggan. Fancy sliding down those hills at top speed. Loony, do you think youll like tobogganing?

Loony had no idea what tobogganing was, but he was sure he would like anything that Snubby liked. He felt the general excitement and decided to show off. He rushed round the room at top speed, barking, then suddenly lost his footing on the highly polished floor, rolled over and finished by sliding along swiftly on his back. Everyone roared.

Is that how youre going to slide over the snow? said Snubby. Youll get along fine like that, Loony.

Would you like to come and unpack? said Mrs. Tickles voice at the door. And by that time, youll be ready for tea, Ive no doubt!

She was right - they certainly would!

CHAPTER SIX

Settling In

A wide staircase led up to the first floor of Rat-a-Tat House, and many rooms opened off the upstairs landing. Everywhere there was panelling, and Snubby went along knocking at the walls, rat-a-tat-tat!

Snubby, must you do that? said Diana. Whats the idea?

Ha - secret passages of course! said Snubby at once. You never know! This place might be riddled with them!

Well, I hope youre not going to knock on the walls every time you pass them, said Diana.

Its Rat-a-Tat House, isnt it? said Snubby, with a grin, and knocked again on some wooden panelling - rat-a-tat-tat! I say, I wonder why its got such a peculiar name? Do you know, Barney?

No, said Barney. But maybe Mrs. Tickle does. Well ask her sometime.

Mrs. Tickle was away along the landing opening doors as she went. You can choose your own rooms, she called. Barney has one to himself, and so has Diana, but you other two boys are to share. The dog can sleep down in the kitchen.

Well, he cant, muttered Snubby under his breath. And whats more, he wont! Hell be sleeping on my bed as usual.

The rooms were rather exciting. They all had panelled walls, which Snubby proceeded to knock on smartly with his knuckles, cushioned window-seats, old-fashioned wash-stands, and cupboards that opened out of the panelling.

You can hardly tell theyre cupboards! said Diana, opening hers. They look just like part of the oak walls. I never had a room like this before. I feel as if Ive slipped a few hundred years back in history!

Our rooms smashing too, announced Snubby. Where's Mrs. Tickle? Oh, shes gone. Good. I just wanted to say something shes not to hear. I am not going to let her shut Loony up in the kitchen tonight, so I shall think of some way to prevent it - and then he can come on my bed as usual. Hed be miserable if he had to sleep in the kitchen.

Diana opened her suit-case and unpacked and put her things away neatly, while the boys explored the other part of the house. Mrs. Tickle called up the stairs. Tea will be ready in five minutes - and the scones are hot, so dont be too long.

Diana shouted for the others. Roger - Barney - Snubby! Teas almost ready, so buck up and unpack!

Roger and Barney came along and put their things away in the great old chests and dark cupboards. Snubby rushed up with Loony at the very last minute, covered with dust and cobwebs.

Where in the world have you been? said Diana, looking at him in disgust. Dont come near me, please! Youre so cobwebby that youve probably got spiders crawling all over you!

Am I? said Snubby, surprised, and brushed himself down so vigorously that dust flew everywhere. I found a little attic place - rather exciting, with old boxes and trunks in it. Hey, whats that!

It was the booming sound of the old gong in the hall. Mrs. Tickle was tired of waiting for them to come down and had suddenly remembered the gong. How it made them jump! Miranda leapt to the top of the curtains at once, and Loony ran under the bed.

Thats calling us for tea, I expect, said Diana. Snubby, youve got to undo your suit-case and put your things away before you come down. Go on, now - buck up!

All right, all right, teacher, said Snubby. Dont start trying to boss me! It wont take me long to unpack

It didnt. He simply undid his suit-case, opened his cupboard door, and emptied everything into it, pell mell. He shoved the suit-case in at the back and then shot downstairs at top speed, Loony just in front of him. The staircase ended in a wide, polished hall, and Loony was able to slide all the way to the front door with the greatest ease.

Jolly good, Loony, said Snubby admiringly, and walked sedately into the sitting-room, where the others were just about to sit down. Diana stared at him accusingly.

You havent had time to unpack. You go back and do it!

Everything is safely in my cupboard, said Snubby. And the suit-case is empty, teacher!

Dont keep calling me that, said Diana, exasperated, but Snubby didnt even hear. His attention had been caught by the meal on the tea-table. On a spotless white cloth were six different plates of food. Where Diana was sitting was a very large brown teapot, a large blue milk jug, and a large basin of sugar lumps. Two dishes of jam were on the table and one pot of fish-paste.

Snubby looked in awe at the six plates of food. Stacks of new bread-and-butter - hot buttered scones, at least three each - gingerbread squares, all brown and sticky - a giant of a chocolate cake - a jam sponge twice as large as usual - and home-made macaroons! Macaroons - my very favourite goody. Hey, Mrs. Tickle, Mrs. Tickle!

And the delighted Snubby with Loony at his heels went rushing out into the kitchen to the surprised Mrs. Tickle to tell her what he thought of the tea. He debated whether to give her a hug but decided that he didnt know her well enough yet.

Mrs. Tickle was very pleased with his admiration of the first meal she had provided. Go along with you, she said, beaming. Youre a caution, you are! Youd better be careful that the others havent eaten everything by the time you get back to the table!

That made Snubby rush off in a panic, but to his relief there was still plenty left. He had to gobble to catch up with them, but Snubby never minded that.

Your table manners havent improved at all, said Diana primly. She felt quite like her mother, sitting

state behind the big brown teapot.

Sorry, teacher, said Snubby, in such a humble voice that everyone laughed. Ill stay in and write out I must please dear Diana, I must please dear Diana one hundred times!

I shall throw something at you in a minute, said Diana. Probably the teapot.

Right, said Snubby. But wait till its empty. I may want another cup of tea. I say, look at Miranda, Barney - shes dipping her fingers into the strawberry jam and then licking them.

Miranda - how can you? said Barney, reprovngly, and the little monkey hid her face in his neck as if she was ashamed - but the next minute, down went her little paw into the jam dish again!

It was a happy, merry tea, and Barney enjoyed it more than any of them. He had been a lonely boy for so many years, longing for the companionship, the teasing, the family talk that he had never had. Now he was quite at home in the fun, and entered into all the teasing with delight. But nobody ever had a readier answer than the cheeky, irrepressible Snubby - he was never at a loss as to what to say or do!

They all helped to clear away tea. By this time, of course, Mrs. Tickle had had to light the lamps. These were old-fashioned oil-lamps, because there was no electricity in Rat-a-Tat House.

You be careful of these lamps, she warned them. And if you want to rush about with that mad dog of yours, Snubby, dont knock them over or youll have the place afire.

Ill be careful, promised Snubby.

There are candles upstairs on the landing, went on Mrs. Tickle, and candles waiting in the hall for when you all go up to bed. And if you want wood for the fire, its in that cupboard there, by the fireplace. Ill bring you more from outside if you want it.

No, you wont, said Roger at once. Ill do that - and just tell us whatever jobs you want done, Mrs. Tickle, and well do them straight away.

Thats what I like to hear! said the little woman, pleased, and went out smiling.

Soon they were all sitting round the fire. Lets have a game, said Snubby. I brought some cards. Ill go and fetch them. He went off upstairs, knocking on the panelling all the way - knock-knock-knock - rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat!

I wish he wouldnt, said Diana. Why does Snubby always have to make some kind of noise?

Snubby came back with the cards, and the children heard his knock-knock-knock on the panelling again. Loony listened with his head on one side and so did Miranda. It was rather an eerie sound, hollow and irritating.

Lets put some more wood on the fire before we begin, said Roger, and opened the door of the little cupboard beside the fireplace, where logs were kept. He hauled one out, threw it on the fire and shut the cupboard door. Then he went with the others to the table and they all sat down to play cards.

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