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Berti und seine Brüder – Die Schokoladenkugel des Bösen

Bertie and His Brothers - The Chocolate Ball of Evil

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Berti comes in like a wrecking ball!

Sibling fun somewhere between the Herdmanns and Troublemaker Street: Life really isn't easy for five-year-old Berti. He has not one, but three big brothers – and all of them are at least twice as old as him! So it's no wonder they only ever see him as the baby who's never allowed to join in their games. After all, as superheroes, they are constantly busy saving the world every day. It's just a pity that their heroic deeds always land them in such a mess that they have to be saved themselves – by Berti, of all people!

- Superheroes are a top topic at the moment and here it's spiced with plenty of humour and a host of hilarious illustrations, so just right for the young target group
- Ideal for reading aloud: a book brimming with mischief that will have parents and children in stitches

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Bertie's brothers were the rowdiest hooligans in the whole town. But you wouldn't have known it just by looking at them. On the contrary. The way their mother cut their hair, you'd have thought they were angels straight from the advent calendar. And when they wanted to, they could behave like angels too. They'd hold the door open for old folk, greet the neighbours, and they would even let Bertie hold their Action Men.

But most of the time they didn't want to.

Maybe all this was the fault of their names. Because Bertie's brothers were called Harald, Stig and Erik. They were the Vikings. Their dad always called them that because in former times only Vikings had those names. Vikings were pirates from the far north who spread terror wherever they went. Just like Bertie's brothers now.

Bertie could well understand that his parents would have yearned for a sweet little child after putting up with these raving lunatics. But why on earth had they had to wait for so long? Couldn't they simply have had him just a teeny-weeny year or two after Erik? Having older brothers is tough enough. Having three older brothers who are already ten, eleven and twelve when you yourself are only five is...sheer HELL!

Worst of all was the fact that Mum and Dad hit on the crazy idea of getting the Vikings to babysit young Bertie – and even to pay them for doing it! Like on the evening when Mum and Dad simply had to go and celebrate something or the other with Dad's arty-farty friends.

In fact the evening started well for Bertie. Because the Vikings had discovered that they didn't actually need the aerial cable of the television, which out of pure meanness Mum had taken with her to the pizzeria. Although they couldn't watch TV now, they *could* watch DVDs. And this made them so happy that they let Bertie sit on the sofa with them and eat as much cherry yoghurt as he liked.

However, when he was on his third pot, something nasty happened. Bertie discovered a furry grey what'saname in his yoghurt.

"What is it?" he asked, showing the Vikings his yoggyopot.

"Hm," said Harald. Using Bertie's spoon, he fished the whatsit out of the yoghurt. Stig switched on Mum's reading lamp, and Erik twisted it round so that the light shone on the spoon. The furry grey thingummy now looked even more yucky. The Vikings looked at it, and looked at one another, and Bertie's heart started thumping.

"What IS it?" he cried again.

"Oh-oh!" was all that Harald could say.

"Oh-oh, oh-oh!" Stig and Erik confirmed what Harald had said.

All three of them pulled a face just like the face they had pulled when Mum and Dad had told them that Mullie their hamster would have to be put to sleep.

Bertie felt himself go all hot and cold.

"Mould!" said Harald. "You've been eating mould! You can only eat mould three times in your life. The fourth time, you'll drop down dead."

"Like Leon's granddad!" said Stig.

"Dropped down dead as a doornail!" said Erik.

"Probably mould poisoning as well," said Harald, sadly shaking his head. "You can't be too careful. Just one moment of not looking..."

"So you've still got two moments to go," said Stig comfortingly, and for the rest of the evening the Vikings were really nice to Bertie, and he was even allowed to sleep beside Harald in Harald's bed.

Next morning he refused to eat his cherry yoghurt, and when Mum gave him a currant bun, he pulled out all the currants because they looked mouldy.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Mum, putting her hand on his forehead. "Are you sick?"

Bertie felt his throat go all tight. "I can only eat two more mouldy things," he said. "And then I'll drop dead."

"Who told you that?"

Bertie didn't tell her who told him. That would have been sneaking, as Mum knew all too well.

"Harald, Stig, Erik!" she yelled. "Kitchen! Now!"

The Vikings always did what Mum told them to do. They ambled in, and Stig picked up a broom, while Erik picked up a tea towel. "Are we on kitchen duty today?"

"I'll take the rubbish out," said Harald, with one hand on the bin and the other on the door handle.

"Not one of you moves till I say so!" said Mum, hands on hips, while the furrows on her forehead told them that they were in deep, deep trouble.

Bertie cringed in a corner.

“No more telly for a month, and Bertie gets all your babysitting money for last night. As compensation.”

The Vikings dropped to their knees.

“It wasn’t me!” howled Erik.

“Harald started it!” howled Stig.

“That’s not fair!” howled Harald. “It’s not our fault if Bertie believes everything we tell him!”

“And I’m only ten!” howled Erik, even louder.

But Mum remained unmoved. She took a fresh currant bun out of the bread bin and put it down on Bertie’s plate. “Nothing for you to be afraid of,” she said, stroking his little head. “It won’t do you any harm at all if you accidentally swallow a bit of mould.”

On this day Bertie never left Mum’s side. He helped her clean the Petri dishes she used for her experiments with liquid fertilizers, and sort out the bills, and iron the washing. Mum’s room was the safest place in the house. And her door was always open.

Until that fateful Monday morning in July...

MONDAY

It all began when Mum didn’t come out of her room. This was not particularly surprising. The fact is that every year she resolved at last and really and truly and once and for all to finish her doctoral thesis. But there was always something that stopped her at the last moment: she had to choose new curtains, or sort out the books on her bookshelves according to colour, or switch the furniture round in every room. And so this year too, Dad wasn’t worried as he, Bertie and the Vikings stood outside her closed door and for the third time he shouted: “Hilde, do you really think you can get it done in a week?”

“Buzz off! I need to concentrate!”

“You heard, boys.” Dad let out a long, loud sigh and stared miserably at all the notes Mum had thrust into his hands before imprisoning herself before imprisoning herself. “I think Number One was shopping.”

Dad sighed again, and plodded downstairs with three of his four sons.

Bertie stayed outside the door. Mum had told him how important the thesis was for her. But was that a good reason for shutting herself in like this? Where could he go now if the Vikings played another of their dirty tricks on him?

What he really felt like doing was kicking the door down, but all he did was put his hand on it.

“What are you doing up there, Bertie?” called Dad from down below.

“Coming!” replied Bertie. He turned round and also plodded down the stairs.

Dad was waiting for him by the front door. The Vikings were already sitting in the car, yelling through the open windows: “Hurry up, we want an ice cream!”

Shopping with Dad was always fun. He didn’t keep on moaning: this isn’t healthy, or that’s got too much artificial colouring, or it’ll send your sugar levels sky high!

Dad had just one comment for everything: OK, but don’t tell your mother.

They had bought so many forbidden things this time that Dad was now busy hiding the jelly babies and crisps in the shoe cupboard and the bottles of lemonade under the living room sofa. The only thing he couldn’t hide was the superhero costumes he’d bought in the toy department.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he whispered once more to the Vikings

“Never!” said Harald.

“Never ever!” said Stig.

“She’ll see them anyway!” whispered Erik.

The Vikings turned round and raced upstairs in their superhero costumes. Bertie stayed down below, and the shopping bag in his hand suddenly felt as heavy as a rock. And it became even heavier when he heard the Vikings celebrating up above. For months they’d been asking, begging and pleading with their mother to buy the costumes. No chance. Much too expensive. And completely unnecessary. “Use your imagination,” she’d said. But one morning’s shopping with Dad, and they’d got everything they wanted.

“Are you still disappointed with your costume?” asked Dad, because Bertie had not spoken a word all this time. “A pirate’s a great thing to be, isn’t it?”

“Stupid pirate,” thought Bertie. He couldn’t even bear to look at the costume which was still in its packet. He wanted to be Superman! It was totally unfair that there hadn’t been any Superman costumes his size!

Bertie and Dad had just finished hiding the cream doughnuts cream doughnuts and the chewing gum behind the curtains when the Vikings came storming noisily into the living room.

They looked *megacool!*

“I’m Superman!” yelled Harald, flexing his mighty muscles.

Stig glared out from behind his black mask: “I’m Batman!”

“And I’m Spiderman!” Erik raised one hand as if he was about to cast his web.

“We fight against evil baddies!” yelled Superman.

“We save the world!” shouted Batman.

“But you’re too small to be a hero!” said Spiderman to Bertie.

“You can’t have a hero’s costume till you’re eight,” said Superman.

“And you don’t even go to school yet,” said Batman.

Bertie swallowed hard. If he started to cry now, the superheroes would really treat him like a baby. He hoped Dad wouldn’t say anything, because when parents tried to intervene it only made things worse.

But Dad hadn’t even heard all these mean remarks because he was hanging halfway over the sofa trying to hide the chocolate muffins under the radiator.

“Follow me!” yelled Superman, racing out into the hall.

Bertie put his marshmallows next to Dad’s legs on the sofa, and followed the superheroes at a safe distance. They chased up and down the stairs as if they were getting ready to fly, but they soon got bored with that.

“Let’s go out,” said Superman. “We’re sure to find an evil baddie outside.”

“And maybe we’ll have to save the world,” said Batman.

“But babies have to stay indoors,” said Spiderman, slamming the front door shut almost in Bertie’s face.

“Marshmallow?” Dad laid his warm hand on Bertie’s shoulder and gently steered him towards the living room. “Head up,” he said, “and don’t worry, soon your brothers will start thinking of nothing but girls.”

Bertie couldn’t see why that should stop him worrying. But the sweet and creamy marshmallow did the trick!

“You’re not a baby.” Dad also sank his teeth into a marshmallow, leaving a blob of white foam hanging from the tip of his nose. “No baby could ever draw as well as you do.”

“Hm,” said Bertie, taking another marshmallow out of the packet.

The ankylosaur had spikes as pointed as needles. And the teeth inside its gigantic mouth were as sharp as knives. What colour would its eyes be? A fiery red! Bertie opened his desk drawer and took out his highlighter pens.

Mumpfftttshshsh!

Mumpfftttshshsh!

Mumpfftttshshsh!

What weird noise was that? Bertie turned to look at the window. Nothing to see except Mr Mucker’s garden shed.

Had the noise come from Mum’s room? She was probably just doing one of her experiments. They usually produced weird noises.

Bertie bent over the ankylosaur again and painted the first eye fiery red.

Mumpfftttshshsh!

It was definitely from outside!

This time when he turned round he could see Batman and Spiderman on the roof of the shed. They were standing very close to the edge and had spread their arms out wide. Then Batman jumped into the air – and disappeared.

Mumpfftttshshsh!

Bertie ran to the window. Spiderman was just stepping towards the edge of the roof, but then he immediately took two steps back.

Ha! So much for being a superhero!

But now Spiderman really did take the plunge! Like a wet flannel he slid down over the edge of the roof and landed on his bottom right in the middle of a lettuce patch.

Mumpfftttshshsh!

The lettuce under Spiderman was now a green splodge, and the rest of the patch didn't look much better. Only in one corner were there a few undamaged lettuces.

Oh, oh, oh, he had to go and land on Mr Mucker's lettuces!

Bertie could hear Dad whistling cheerfully downstairs, but before he could decide whether to call him or not, the doorbell rang. And the ringing was so fierce and furious, you'd think there was an ankylosaur at the door.

Then suddenly it stopped.

Now Bertie heard a loud voice – and it wasn't Dad's.

Cautiously he tiptoed onto the landing and peeped down between the banisters. Dad was standing below with his arm round Spiderman, who was looking down at the floor. He was no longer wearing his mask, which Mr Mucker was waving furiously in front of Dad as he shouted: "If I catch those three at it once more, I'll call the police!"

"Ok, OK," said Dad, "it won't happen again. Here!" He pulled a banknote out of his wallet. "This should cover the cost of your squashed lettuce."

Mr Mucker grabbed the note and growled: "Can't you send those three to some holiday camp?"

He gave Dad the Spiderman mask, and then left, slamming the door behind him.

Dad sighed and mumbled: "Idiot!"

Bertie saw that not only did Spiderman now look up, but also Superman and Batman now looked out, as they opened the kitchen door just a crack. When Dad turned round to look at *them*, they immediately put on their most angelic expressions.

“Boys,” said Dad seriously, “what on earth did you think you were doing? You can’t just go jumping on the lettuces of people you don’t know.”

“We didn’t mean to jump,” said Superman. “We wanted to fly!”

“Exactly,” said Batman.

“Fly,” said Spiderman.

“Whatever,” said Dad. “I’ll say it again: next time, I shan’t pay for any damage you do. Next time, you’ll pay with your pocket money.”

And so saying, he disappeared into the loo with a cheerful whistle.

Eh, what? Was that it? Was that all?

Bertie was as amazed as the others. They could hardly imagine what sort of punishment Mum would have inflicted on them.

“Told you it was going to be a great week!” said Superman, high-fiving Batman and Spiderman.

But he was celebrating all too soon.

“HARALD! STIG! ERIK!”

Mum’s voice was so loud, it was as if she had beamed herself out of her room.

“It’s so unfair!” moaned Superman. “It’s not our fault if he puts his lettuces where we have to jump!”

“I didn’t really jump anyway,” groaned Spiderman.

Batman didn’t say anything. But Bertie could see how furious he was. He was ripping weeds out of the cracks at such speed that there was grass flying all over the place.

“Mum’s not fair either,” said Superman. “Ours is the longest drive in the whole street!”

“And we’re only children.” Spiderman reached into his bucket and threw a fir cone over Mr Mucker’s garden fence.

“Don’t do that, you dummy!” hissed Batman. “Mum’s got X-ray eyes.”

“Dummy yourself!” Spiderman threw a few fir cones at Batman. That was a mistake. With a roar, Batman hurled himself at Spiderman, and as the two of them wrestled themselves into a tangle, they kicked Superman’s bucket and all the moss fell out of it.

“I’ve had enough of you two!” yelled Superman, and launched himself onto his two brothers.

Bertie raced out of harm’s way on his scooter, then stood on the path and watched the superheroes rolling all over the drive. Shouting and screaming, they crashed into the rubbish bin which Dad had put out this morning. It tipped over, the lid opened, and a huge pile of stinking cans, mill cartons and plastic packaging landed in the road. A delivery van slammed on its brakes, and the driver shouted: “What are you doing, you ***** idiots?”

“Sorry,” said Bertie. “We’ll clear it up now!”

“And so you ***** well should!” shouted the driver. Then he swerved round the rubbish and parked in front of *Cathy’s Candies*. Bertie watched him get out and open the hatch of his delivery van: supplies for *Cathy’s Candies*, which meant tons of sweets and chocolate, jelly babies, acid drops, marshmallows...and last of all, the man carried a huge gold carton into the shop – big enough for Bertie to sit in.

“What’s in that?” asked Spiderman.

“You think I’ve got X-ray eyes?” sneered Batman.

Superman screwed up his eyes and looked across the road at the shop. Then he said: “Clever! They’ve packed it in a gold box so my X-ray eyes can’t see through. We’ll have to look for another way to find out what’s in it.”

However, they didn’t go straight to *Cathy’s Candies*. Instead they waited until the driver came out of the shop and drove away. No sooner had he gone than Cathy and her daughter Calliope appeared in the shop front. They were wearing white gloves and had transparent plastic caps on their heads, which they always put on when they were handling the most expensive chocolate.

Bertie slowly followed the Vikings across the road on his scooter, and they all stopped outside the shop. Cathy smiled nicely when she saw the superheroes. Dad said she was “a kind soul”.

Calliope also smiled. But her smile was different. It reminded Bertie of a cat playing with a mouse before eating it. Even Superman was afraid of her, because she’d once given him a black eye in the playground. Bertie was glad there was a thick glass window between them.

Cathy and Calliope now hung up a white cloth as well, so that nobody could see from outside what they were doing in the shop window.

“What are they up to?” grumbled Batman, kicking a stone towards the shop door.

“Looks suspicious,” said Superman, putting his hands on his hips. “Extremely suspicious.”

“Eh?” asked Spiderman. “Why’s it suspicious?”

Superman didn’t answer. He just went on staring at the white cloth and frowning.

Whatever suspicious activity Cathy and Calliope were performing in the shop window went on for quite a long time. So long in fact that Bertie was just thinking of scooting home when suddenly the white cloth moved, and the very next moment it disappeared altogether.

“Wow!” gasped Superman.

“Amazing!” gasped Batman.

“What is it?” cried Spiderman.,

Bertie could see what it was. Hovering in the air, like a basketball but even bigger, it was a giant ball made entirely of chocolate. Slowly it revolved on its own axis. There was an opening in the ball, and the inside was hollow.

“Are those Smarties inside it?” asked Spiderman.

Rubbish! Bertie could see at once that the colourful little chocolate balls inside the big ball were much bigger than Smarties. They were definitely the expensive chocolates that Mum always scoffed in secret to calm her nerves. Bertie was the only one of the four sons who had been allowed to try them a few times, and just the thought of them made his mouth water.

“I know what that is,” said Superman grimly. Once again he put his hands on his hips and thrust out his chin. “It’s *The Chocolate Ball of Evil!* That’s the worst threat to the safety of the world that ever existed! And we superheroes are the only ones who can destroy it!”

Xxxxxxxxxx

Still Wednesday

The footpath to the allotments was narrow and overgrown. Again and again, Bertie had to duck under a bramble or dodge a patch of stinging nettles.

Apart from the superheroes, there was no one to be seen. No Batman. No Cathy. No Mr Schmidt. Not even one of the grandfathers who took their dogs here for walkies. Nevertheless, the superheroes crept along the warpath from bush to bush, like hunters in the jungle, and if they wanted to communicate, they whispered or gave one another secret hand signals.

However, when they went round a bend, the whispering became nervous. When Bertie came nearer, he immediately saw why: here the path split into two paths which were even narrower and even more overgrown.

“But supposing it’s the one on the right?” hissed Spiderman. “You don’t know everything just because you’re twelve!”

“We’re going left!” hissed Superman.

“Shhhh!” whispered Spiderman. “Did you hear that?”

Superman listened. So did Bertie. There really was something. Voices. And they were coming closer.

“Everyone take cover!” hissed Superman, and threw himself so hard into the nearest bush that all the branches cracked.

Bertie also created a crunchy crack as he ducked behind a shrub. Unfortunately it didn't have any leaves, but before he could find a better hiding place, two people appeared on the right-hand path: Cathy and Mr Schmidt.

"You really must come and have a coffee with me," Cathy was saying, "and I've baked some fresh fruitcake too."

"I shan't say no," said Mr Schmidt, and he passed by so close to Bertie's shrub that he simply must have seen him. Except that he didn't, because luckily he was gazing at Cathy. But now he stopped, and said solemnly: "I promise you, I shall deal with Stig Nuggle."

"Oh, Mr Schmidt..they're just children..."

"No, no, we can't let him get away with that! That's what leads to a criminal career. Sweets today, armed robbery tomorrow!" Mr Schmidt pushed some hanging branches to one side so that they wouldn't touch Cathy. Then the two of them disappeared round the bend.

The superheroes crept out of their hiding places and picked a few broken twigs out of their costumes and hair. Unless they had tomatoes stuck in their eyes, they could hardly have failed to see Bertie behind his dried-up shrub. But just like Mr Schmidt before them, they didn't see him. Had he become invisible? Or were the superheroes only pretending he wasn't there, so that he'd lose any desire to creep after them and would go home instead.

They'd have to wait a long time!

"Ah, look at that!" cried Superman.

He wasn't pointing at Bertie but at the left-hand path, or to be more precise at some nettles which had been trodden flat. And also at a black piece of cloth. It was just lying there on the ground.

Black and shiny.

Bertie knew at once where it came from. In the whole street there was only one such black, shiny material: Batman's cape.

"Looks as if it's been bitten off by a crocodile." Superman picked it up. "But where on earth is Batman?"

"Maybe the crocodile ate him?" suggested Spiderman, his voice trembling.

"What crocodile?" asked Superman, shaking his head impatiently. "He must be hiding somewhere around here."

Bertie looked beyond the superheroes. The path really did look as if someone had been running away from a crocodile. And they had been zigzagging all the way. There were squashed nettles everywhere, and broken brambles too. Whoever had been running here had been trying to shake something off. Or someone.

Silently, their bodies bent low, the superheroes crept from clue to clue. And Bertie followed them at a safe distance.

“Huhu,” whispered someone.

The voice came from up in the air.

At first all Bertie could see of Batman was his white soles. They were hanging down through the dense leaves. And the dense leaves were high up a tree. And there on a thick branch of the tree sat the rest of Batman, clinging to the trunk.

“Has he gone?” he asked.

“Ages ago!” Superman waved his arms. “You can come down now.”

“Are you sure he’s gone?”

“Yes! So will you just...”

Superman broke off at the sound of a deep growl.

Now Bertie realized that the piece of cloth had not been bitten off Batman’s cape by a crocodile. The biter was a dog. But not any old dog. In the grass, not ten yards away, stood Asterisk. And from his great chest came another deep, loud growl.

“Mummy...” whimpered Spiderman.

“Good doggie, nice doggie,” murmured Superman soothingly.

But there was nothing good or nice about this dog. He was the meanest, slyest, nastiest dog that ever lived or ever would live. Once he had even bitten through the metal rods of Bertie’s pram. And unlike other dogs, he had not grown old and grey and weak with the passing years. Asterisk was now blacker, nastier and faster than ever.

“I told you he was still here!” screeched Batman from above.

“Now what are we going to do?” whimpered Spiderman.

“Everyone up the tree!” shouted Superman.

As nimbly as a pair of squirrels, the two superheroes swung themselves onto the lowest branches and then heaved themselves upwards. Not a second too soon, because Asterisk was already leaping towards them and snapping at their heels. His razor sharp teeth missed them by a hair’s breadth.

“Aaaaah!” screamed Superman and Spiderman as they scrambled upwards to join Batman.

Down on the ground, the only human being left for Asterisk to bite was Bertie.

Trembling all over, he cowered behind a tree trunk. Hadn’t Dad once told them that dogs could smell human fear? In that case, it wouldn’t take Asterisk much longer to smell Bertie’s terror. Fortunately, he was still looking up at the superheroes and baring his teeth.

“You’ve got to help us, Bertie!” shouted Superman.

“All of a sudden you can see me now,” thought Bertie. Now that the one thing he wanted to be was invisible.

“Help us, Bertie!” cried Batman and Superman.

“Then we’ll let you play with our Action Men for two whole days!” cried Superman. “That’s a promise!”

“Promise! Promise!” cried Batman and Spiderman.

Down below, Asterisk was licking his lips. Then he let out a greedy growl.

“No thanks,” said Bertie to himself. He wasn’t all *that* crazy about Action Men.

“You’ve got to lure him away from us! Otherwise we’ll never be able to come down!” shouted Batman.

“That’s right!” shouted Spiderman. “Lure him away!”

Oh yes, just like that! But if Bertie had been able to move, the first thing he’d have done would have been to tap his head to show them they were crazy. How could he possibly lure Asterisk away? Turn himself into a sausage?

Oh.

Oh!

Well, yes...this plan might work. *If* Bertie could get home safe and sound.

He cautiously looked across at Asterisk. The dog was now growling and snuffling his way round the tree, and although Bertie didn’t know a great deal about dogs, one thing was obvious: Asterisk was searching for something to bite.

Bertie looked around. Asterisk would bite through a branch in no time. He wouldn’t touch a stone. But otherwise there was nothing Bertie could throw to him. Except...

Except his brand new, bright red trainers.

Oh no, not his trainers!

He looked around again. No. Nothing else available. And so, as quietly as he possibly could, he eased himself out of his trainers. But not quietly enough.

Asterisk stopped, raised his head, and looked straight at Bertie.

“It’ll be OK,” murmured Bertie to himself. And then with all the strength he could muster, he hurled one trainer as far along the path as possible. The shoelaces flapped through the air, and Asterisk launched himself after them, while Bertie launched himself in the opposite direction.

With one final effort, Bertie dragged himself up the steps to the front door. His muscles and lungs were on fire. He had just run even faster than he had run yesterday, and there was no doubt that he would never ever be able to run as fast again. And he had done it without any shoes!

Bertie sighed as he panted. One of those bright red trainers would now be lying all chomped and chewed in Asterisk's tummy.

And the other one?

It was only now that Bertie realized he was still clutching the other one in his fist. Stupid! What could you do with just one shoe?

Throw it away?

No, Bertie didn't have the heart to do that. Once he was in the hall, he put the one shoe in the space he had recently made for the two shoes. He felt a bit like he had when Dad had taken the dead bird that had fallen out of its nest and buried it in the garden.

But instead of mourning his chewed-up trainer, he should be thinking of the superheroes! They were stuck up a tree waiting for him to rescue them.

Why did it have to be him?

Bertie could hear Dad hammering away down in the cellar. He was the one who should rescue the superheroes. After all, they were *his* kids! And Bertie had already done all he could yesterday. Today it was Dad's turn.

On the other hand...Bertie would dearly love to see how gobsmacked the superheroes would be if he was the one who came up with a superspecially brilliant plan to save them. Then they would definitely and finally stop calling him a baby.

"Let's go," he murmured, heaved himself into the kitchen, opened the fridge door and grabbed hold of a packet of sausages. Then he hauled himself up the stairs to the superheroes' room. The door was wide open, and Bertie stood rooted to the spot.

What a pigsty!

Mum always said tidiness was next to godliness. The superheroes should have taken a bit more notice of that! Because maybe their lives now depended on tidiness.

Bertie looked for a spot where he could put his foot without stepping on something. The floor was simply covered with Lego bricks, Playmobil figures, matchbox cars, dirty clothes and sticky playing cards. He had to watch out for marbles too, because a few months ago Dad had slipped on one of them and broken both arms. The superheroes had put on their angel faces, promised to improve, and then simply shoved all their stuff under their beds or into the cupboards. Two days later, out it all came again, and their room was back to its normal pigsty self.

Bertie sighed. The only tidy thing he could see was the shelf containing the Action Man figures. He looked at them longingly for a moment. But no, there was no time to play with them now.

Under what pile of things was the Batmobile hiding itself?

Gingerly he began to dig. He threw the dirty socks, wooden swords, water pistols and books back over his shoulder, and he almost did the same with the remote control for the Batmobile. Just in time he recognized what he was holding in his hands. He pulled out the antenna and operated the two levers that drove the Batmobile in a straight line. At first nothing happened. But then one of the piles slowly began to move.

Bertie revved it up. The movement of the pile accelerated and let out a quiet humming noise. The T-shirts, coloured pencils, half-chewed apples and exercise books suddenly flew to one side, and freed from its burden, the Batmobile came racing towards Bertie. He stopped it just before it crashed into his feet. He couldn't remember it being this big. There would be plenty of room for all five sausages!

He quickly took out the packet, which he had hidden under his T-shirt. Would five be enough, though? Or should he go and get a meatball from the fridge as well? That would fit nicely into the driver's seat.

Bertie pulled one sausage after another out of the plastic wrapper and stuck them on the Batmobile with the supersticky tape he'd found on Spiderman's desk. He made sure the sausages were well and truly stuck, because his own life would depend on that too!

To make doubly sure, he did a test run outside on the path. Only when the Batmobile and the sausages had passed with an A grade did he set out to rescue the superheroes from death and destruction.

It felt good to have some shoes on his feet again, even if they were only his old, worn-out house shoes. He ran at top speed, and soon he reached the spot where they had found the torn piece of black cloth. From here he would have to send the Batmobile on in advance, and he would follow at a safe distance. Any other way would have been too dangerous, because Asterisk would smell him long before he could hear or see Asterisk.

For one last time, Bertie checked the sticky tape that held the sausages. Then he switched on the engine. With a buzz the Batmobile zoomed away, past the flattened nettles and the broken brambles and the wild undergrowth. It was all going perfectly. But then Bertie pressed the tube even harder, the Batmobile veered to one side, crashed into a stone, turned over and landed on the sausages.

Oh!

He must have made it go too fast.

He ran to it and put it the right way up. Nothing like that must happen again! If Asterisk...

A deep growl made Bertie jump.

When he looked up, his heart almost fell into his trousers with terror. Where the path curved into a bend, there stood Asterisk staring straight at him. But what was even more terrifying was that hanging out of his jaws was a bright red shoelace.

Bertie gulped. What had happened to his trainer would be what would happen to him if his plan didn't work.

Panic-stricken, he pulled and pushed the little levers on the remote control. The Batmobile sprang into life, but unfortunately did not head for Asterisk. Instead it reversed back towards Bertie.

And Asterisk came too, in forward gear.

Aaahhh!!!

Bertie's legs wanted to take him away at once. Away from the Batmobile and away from Asterisk. Away from everything!

But his head had other ideas. Don't run! No one can run as fast as Asterisk! You must DO something!

"It'll be OK, it'll be OK," Bertie whispered to himself. He let go of the little levers and the Batmobile came to a sudden halt. Asterisk too.

Now concentrate!

Direction lever forward.

Accelerate sloooowly.

The Batmobile rolled forward and gathered speed. Asterisk cocked his head. His evil black eyes were no longer looking at Bertie but at the Batmobile. And this was now racing straight towards him. Just before it reached his slavering jaws, it swerved round him and disappeared in a flash round the bend.

What did not disappear, however, was Asterisk.

Aaaarrgh!

Bertie hardly dared to breathe. There was no longer anything between him and Asterisk, apart from the grass, the nettles and the brambles, and...the remote control in his hand.

The remote control!

With trembling fingers Bertie moved the direction lever backwards, and gently accelerated. The buzzing of the Batmobile came closer again. Asterisk turned his head.

"It'll be OK," whispered Bertie. Then once more he steered the Batmobile towards the bend.

A swift and snappy bark, and at long last Asterisk went chasing after the Batmobile. Both of them disappeared round the bend, and Bertie followed.

He was concentrating so much on steering the Batmobile that he almost forgot what he was supposed to be there for! But just as he ran past the tree to which the superheroes were clinging for

dear life, there was a rustling, cracking sound above him and Superman shouted:

“Is that you, Bertie?”

And Batman shouted: “Was that *my* Batmobile?”

At the same moment, Asterisk was about to bite into the sausages.

No! Not yet!

Bertie steered the Batmobile towards a hillock.

“Aaarrgh!” screamed Batman. “Bertie, do something!”

And Bertie did something, although it wasn't what Batman would have wanted him to do. He turned the direction lever to the right and gave the Batmobile full throttle. It hurtled up and over the hillock and went flying through the air.

And Asterisk went flying after it.

Bertie would never forget the terrible sounds that followed. A crunching crackle as the Batmobile's plastic split and splintered between Asterisk's razor-sharp teeth. And then a dull thud as the dog crashed into the undergrowth.

After that, a gruesomely grating growling and grinding as the dog devoured not only the sausages but also the entire Batmobile!

“Let's go!” yelled Superman. “Everyone down the tree!”

Before Bertie could even think of saying “Hey, wait for me!” the superheroes had gone racing past him and along the path.

Super!

Bertie could only hope that Asterisk would take a bit longer to demolish the sausages and the Batmobile. Then off he ran as fast as his legs could carry him.