

Plays for Young Audiences

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2400 THIRD AVENUE SOUTH
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA 55404
612-872-5108
FAX 612-874-8119

I Was a Rat!

By
Barbara Field

Based on the Book by
Philip Pullman

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ACT ONE

THE NEWSBOY IS HAWKING PAPERS.

NEWSBOY

Extra, extra, read all about it! Prince Richard to be married. Extra, extra!

TO A GENTLEMAN :

Paper, mister?

THE MAN PAYS FOR HIS PAPER, GOES.

READER (PHILOSOPHER ROYAL)

“It happened at the ball! At midnight last night the Palace announced the engagement of His Royal Highness Prince Richard to the Lady Aurelia Ashington....” Well, well, it’s about time...

AS HE GOES OFF, A LADY READING THE PAPER ENTERS.

READER (DIRECTOR OF LOST CHILDREN)

“It is understood that the royal wedding will be celebrated very soon.”

SHE EAGERLY TURNS THE PAGE.

“It was like something out of a fairy tale: the charming prince and the lovely young girl.”—never heard of her—“only had eyes for each other as they waltzed...”

AS SHE EXITS (READING) THE LIGHTS COME UP ON BOB AND JOAN IN THE INTIMACY OF THEIR KITCHEN. SHE IS READING ALOUD TO HIM AS HE COBBLES. HE IS WORKING ON A DAINTY PAIR OF SCARLET SLIPPERS.

JOAN

“...Something out of a fairy tale: the charming prince and the lovely young girl only had eyes for each other.” Well, isn’t that nice, Bob? This time I hope it’s the real thing for the prince.

BOB

Let’s hope so—it’s about time. Now could you turn to the sports page? I’ve had about all the romance I can take for one day.

JOAN

How you coming with that cobbling?

BOB

| Slowly. Come on, love, read the latest rugby scores.

JOAN

Hold on, I'll look. Who are you making them little shoes for?

BOB

For no one. For fun.

JOAN

Red slippers? And they're so small no one will be able to squeeze into them.

BOB

But they're pretty, en't they?

JOAN

It's a waste of time, Bob. Speaking of which it's getting on toward bed time—

THERE IS A SHARP RAP AT THE FRONT DOOR.

JOAN

What's that then?

BOB

Was it someone knocking?

JOAN

At this hour?

BOB

What's the time?

JOAN

Near ten—

ANOTHER RAP, LOUDER. BOB TAKES UP A CANDLE.

BOB

I'd best go see who it is.

BOB OPENS THE DOOR.

OUTSIDE STANDS A LITTLE BOY DRESSED IN LIVERY.

HIS JACKET IS TATTERED AND SOILED, AND HIS WHITE WIG IS ASKEW AND WILDLY UNTIDY. HE IS SCRATCHED AND DIRTY.

AND SCARED.

BOB

Bless my soul!

He must be lost. JOAN

Who are you? BOB

I was a rat. BOY

What did he say? (TO THE BOY:) What did you say? JOAN

I was a rat. BOY

You were a—go on with you! Where do you live? What's your name? JOAN

I was a rat. BOY

BOB AND JOAN LOOK AT EACH OTHER, BEWILDERED.

Well I never! BOB

It's freezing out there. (TO THE BOY:) You'd best come inside. JOAN

THEY DRAG HIM IN AND SEAT HIM BY THE FIRE.

He's shivering, poor thing..

SHE FETCHES A SHAWL, WRAPS IT AROUND HIM.

What shall we do about this? BOB

Feed him, he looks like he's starving. My mother used to make us bread and milk at night before we went to bed. JOAN

That sounds like just the thing, eh? BOB

WHILE JOAN FETCHES MILK IN A BOWL AND BREAKS BREAD INTO IT, SETTING IT ON THE TABLE:

Now, lad, what's your name?

BOY

Haven't got a name.

BOB

Everyone's got a name. My name is Bob, and that's Joan. You sure you haven't got a name?

BOY

I lost it. Forgot it. I was a rat.

BOB

I see. (HE DOESN'T) You got a nice uniform on. I expect you're in some kind of service, are you?

THE BOY LOOKS DOWN AT HIS LIVERY.

BOY

Dunno. Dunno what that means.

BOB

In service means being someone's servant. Having a master or mistress, you run errands for 'em. Page boys like you, they usually ride along with the master or mistress in a coach.

BOY

I done that! I was a good page boy, I done everything right.

JOAN

Course you did.

JOAN SETS THE BOWL OF BREAD AND MILK IN FRONT OF THE BOY, HANDS HIM A SPOON, WHICH HE IGNORES. INSTEAD HE PUTS HIS FACE INTO THE BOWL DIRECTLY, AND SLURPS UP THE FOOD.

BOB

Hold on, there—

JOAN

Hey, what's that? Dear oh dear, use the spoon, that's what it's for.

THE BOY FINALLY LIFTS HIS FACE, PUZZLED. JOAN HOLDS UP THE SPOON.

JOAN

The spoon? He don't know anything, poor lad. This is a *spoon*. Come to the sink and we'll wash you, grubby hands and all.

THE BOY STICKS HIS FACE BACK INTO THE BOWL.

BOY

That's nice, I like that....

BOB

It'll still be here when you come back. I'll look after it for you.

JOAN LEADS HIM TO THE WASH TUB, GIVES HIM A GOOD HANDS-AND-FACE SCRUB. THE BOY KEEPS LOOKING BACK AT BOB TO BE SURE HE ISN'T EATING THE FOOD.

JOAN

Come here.

BOB

I told you. I won't touch your food.

JOAN

There, you look better. Now you be a good boy and eat with the spoon. I'm surprised they didn't teach you better manners when you was a page boy.

BOY

I was a rat.

JOAN

Rats don't have manners, but boys do. You say 'thank you' when someone gives you something.

BOY

Thank you.

BOB

Good. Now I'll teach you to eat with the spoon.

BOY

Spoon.

BOB

Spoon. You hold it so, and bring it to your mouth.

THE BOY MAKES SEVERAL LAME ATTEMPTS. BUT HE MANAGES TO EAT THE REST OF HIS FOOD.

BOY

Thank you.

BOB

Well done. Now I'll show you how to wash your bowl and spoon.

THEY CROSS TO THE SINK.

You know how old you are?

BOY

Yes. I'm three weeks old, I am.

BOB

Three weeks?!

BOY

Yes, and I've got two brothers and three sisters the same age, three weeks. I en't seen them in a long time.

JOAN

How long?

BOY

Days.

BOB

And where's your mother and father?

BOY

Under the ground.

BOB AND JOAN LOOK AT EACH OTHER.

BOB

That's sad.

JOAN

Oh, the poor tyke, he's an orphan.

BOB

Parents dead and buried—

THE BOY HAS TAKEN A BITE OUT OF THE NEWSPAPER, THEN, AS HE CHEWS, LOOKS AT THE REST OF IT.

BOY

Look here, it's Mary Jane!

BOB

Her name's not Mary Jane. She's gonna marry the prince. That en't the kind of name they give princesses.

JOAN

I think you're confused, lad. Bob, we'll have to make up a bed for him. (TO THE BOY) I think you could do with a bit of rest. Tomorrow we'll find your proper home.

BOY

Thank you.

JOAN STARTS READYING A BED.

JOAN

Here's one of Bob's old nightshirts, you can take off that dirty jacket and wear this.
SHE HANDS ROGER THE SHIRT, TAKES HIS JACKET. HE
DISAPPEARS INTO THE AREA THAT'S BEEN MADE UP AS HIS BED.

BOB

Meanwhile, we'll have to call you something.

BOY

Something.

BOB

A proper name...like Kaspar, or....Jeremiah...or Alban—

JOAN

Roger! I think we should call him Roger.

BOB

Lovely name, Roger. You always fancied it. Well, it's only for tonight. Can't do no harm.
(TO BOY) We'll give you the name Roger.

BOY

Thank you.

JOAN SINGS TO HIM

JOAN

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the lord my soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake, I pray the lord my soul to take...”

ROGER

Thank you.

BOB AND JOAN LOOK AT EACH OTHER. JOAN PULLS THE
CURTAINS CLOSED AROUND THE BED.

BOB

What are we going to do with him? He might be a wild boy.

JOAN

If the poor tyke had a mum, she'd be worried to death by now.

BOB

He might have been abandoned as a baby and brung up by wolves. Or rats. I read about a boy like that last week, in the Daily Scourge—

JOAN

Stuff and nonsense. That newspaper—that *rag*, the Daily Scourge, prints nothing but rubbish.

BOB

You read it too.

JOAN

Only the news about the royal family.

BOB

He told us, you heard him. ‘I was a rat,’ he said.

JOAN

Rats don't wear page boy uniforms. Nor can they speak.

THEY START TO EXIT.

BOB

He could've learned to speak by listening through the walls.

JOAN

Nonsense.

BOB

He could've stole that jacket off a washing line.

SHE KISSES HIM ON THE PATE.

JOAN

You're a silly old man.

BOB

And you're a soft-hearted old lady....

BY NOW THEY'RE OFF. LIGHT CHANGE. MORNING.

JOAN ENTERS, PUTS THE KETTLE ON THE HOB. SHE GOES TO ROGER'S BED AREA, PULLS OPEN THE CURTAINS AND SCREAMS. ROGER IS LYING IN WHAT WAS A BED. IT'S MORE LIKE A NEST, NOW, WITH FEATHERS ALL OVER, AND RIPPED SHEETS. HE IS FAST ASLEEP.

JOAN

Bob, wake up! Come in here!

BOB ENTERS, HALF ASLEEP.

BOB

What—? Look at that mess, will you? Looks like a fox got into the henhouse.

JOAN

Roger, Roger, wake up! What have you done?

HE WAKES UP INSTANTLY, CHEERFULLY.

ROGER

I'm hungry again.

JOAN

Look what you've done! What were you thinking of?

ROGER

(VERY PROUD:) Yes, it was an hard job, but I done it. There's lots more that needs to be torn up, but I'll do that after breakfast.

JOAN

No, no, you won't! You shouldn't tear things up. Now I'll have to sew them all back together. Dear oh dear!

BOB

Did you do that because you was a rat?

ROGER NODS.

JOAN

Never mind what he *was*, it's what he is *now* that matters. Roger, you can't tear things up like that, do you understand?

BOB

Know what you say when you've upset someone?

ROGER SHAKES HIS HEAD.

You say 'I'm sorry.'

ROGER

I'm sorry.

JOAN

Well, you'll know better next time. Let's get you some breakfast. Then we've got to find out where you come from. Someone must be missing you, and you can't stay here.

ROGER

But I want to stay here in your nest.

NEWSBOY

(OFF:) Extra, extra!

BOB

There's clever folk in City Hall, they'll know where you belong.

JOAN

Come along, love.

LIGHTS FADE ON BOB AND JOAN'S HOUSE.

NEWSBOY

Extra, extra, read the exclusive interview with Prince Richard, in today's Daily Scourge. How he met the Princess, page 3. How it feels to be in love, page 11. Extra!

READER (DIR. OF LOST CHILDREN)

For a fact file on the playboy Prince's previous girlfriends turn to pages 4, 5 and 6.

READER (PHILOSOPHER ROYAL)

"'I've never seen him so in love,' said a close friend of the Prince."

A SIGN APPEARS. IT SAYS "BUREAU OF LOST CHILDREN."

A LADY SITS AT A DESK.
BOB AND JOAN ENTER WITH ROGER IN TOW.

BOB

“Bureau of Lost Children.” Properly speaking, we oughter go to the Office of *Found* Children, because this here is a found child.

JOAN

(GIGGLING:) Oh Bob, you’re a silly old man!

DIRECTOR OF LOST CHILDREN (DLC)

(ALL BUSINESS:) Tell me the details.

BOB

Well, it’s like this...last night there was a knock at the door and....

AS BOB EXPLAINS (SILENTLY) TO THE LADY, ROGER EYES A CUP OF PENCILS ON HER DESK. HE NICKS ONE, TAKES A BITE. IT TASTES GOOD.

DLC

Our records are very thorough. There are no lost children in the city at the moment—

BOB

But what about found children? (JOAN LAUGHS AT HIS WIT.)

DLC

In this department we only deal with *lost* ones. Have you asked him where he came from? He must have said *something*?

JOAN

“I was a rat.”

DLC

I’m trying to help you, though it’s not my job. You, boy—

BOB, JOAN AND THE LADY TURN TO ROGER.
THE PENCIL IS DOWN TO A STUMP.

JOAN

Child, what have you been doing?

ROGER

Tastes good. Thank you.

DLC

That was the property of the City Council. I shall have to ask you to pay for it!
Bad boy!

BOB ANTES UP A COIN, AND ROGER REALIZES HE'S DONE
SOMETHING WRONG.

ROGER

I'm sorry.

BOB

He don't know where he came from. He said he was a rat. "I was a rat," he said.

DLC

I don't have the time to waste on such foolishness. Good morning!

BOB

Frankly speaking, you en't been much help, lady. Good day to you.
HE GRABS ROGER'S HAND, THEY START TO GO.

BOB

Up, up, up.

ROGER

En't I going to stay there?

BOB

No.

ROGER

Is that because I'm a bad boy?

JOAN

You're not a bad boy. But you do have a peculiar appetite.

BOB

You can't go eating other folks' property, can you?
THEY WALK INTO THE STREET.

JOAN

Look across the road, there, Bob, that's the orphanage.

BOB

Shall we take him there....?

JOAN

Yes, maybe we should....let's take a look.

THEY TAKE A GOOD LOOK.

BOB

Joan? I got a feeling....

JOAN

Me too. And I can smell the sour cabbage from over here.

BOB

Lots of the windows are broke—the rain must come inside in bad weather.

JOAN

Listen, I think I hear someone crying inside.

THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER FOR A MOMENT.

BOB AND JOAN

No. No orphanage.

THE TRIO MOVES ON.

BOB

Well then?

JOAN

Perhaps we'd better go to the police station.

THE DUTY SERGEANT SITS AT A DESK (A *HIGHER* DESK THAN THE LOST-CHILDREN LADY'S).

SERGEANT

Well?

BOB

We found a little boy last night. He don't know where he come from, so we thought we ought to bring him here.

ROGER

I *do* know where I come from. I come from down under the market. There's a broken gutter under the cheese stall, and we had a nest there. I was a rat.

SERGEANT

You know there's such an offense as wasting police time.

BOB

No, he's confused is all.

SERGEANT

Name?

BOB

He's forgotten his name—probably had a bang on the head.

ROGER

I know it now. It's Roger.

SERGEANT

Surname?

ROGER

My surname?...is Sur Roger....

SERGEANT

What this boy needs is a good education...with discipline!

JOAN

School? Why didn't we think of that? Fortunately it's round the corner—hey there—

ROGER HAS TAKEN A PENCIL FROM THE SERGEANT'S DESK, IS TRYING TO RESIST EATING IT.

No, Roger, give that back to the policeman, you can't eat it.

THE TRIO LEAVES IN A HURRY, THE SERGEANT LOOKS AFTER THEM, PUZZLED.

READER (CRIBBINS)

“Palace News. To celebrate the royal marriage, a spectacular redecoration of the palace will take place!”

READER (MARTHA TAPSCREW)

“Item. Police announced the discovery of a lost boy, who turned up in the market district, claiming to be a rat. Anyone missing a small boy—or a large rat—contact Sergeant Higgenbottom at...” Hmmm...

JOAN LEADS ROGER TO SCHOOL.

JOAN

You look as clean as a whistle, Roger, and I'm very proud of you for not eating up your

bedclothes last night.

ROGER

Thank you. Is this the school?

JOAN

Indeed it is.

ROGER

Will it be fun?

JOAN

Oh yes, you'll be with other boys and girls. You'll find someone to play with. Here is Miss Cribbins's class room.

THREE CHILDREN SIT ON THE BENCH (PROBABLY IN SILHOUETTE). MISS CRIBBINS PACES WITH A LONG POINTER IN HER HAND. SHE INSPECTS ROGER.

CRIBBINS

So this is the new boy. Attention, class. Welcome our new student. Name?

ROGER

Roger.

CRIBBINS

How old are you, Roger?

ROGER

Three weeks.

THE KIDS LAUGH.

CRIBBINS

Don't be silly, that's not a good way to start here.

JOAN

He's lost his memory, poor lamb.

CRIBBINS

You may leave now, madam. He's in good hands.

ROGER

Joan—?

JOAN

You'll be fine. Bye, Roger.

JOAN LEAVES RELUCTANTLY.

CRIBBINS

(TO ROGER:) Sit down. Now class, take out your pencils.

THE CHILDREN TAKE OUT THEIR PENCILS. ROGER
LOOKS AT THEM, LICKS HIS LIPS.

ROGER

Are we going to eat now?

TO HIS SURPRISE THEY BEGIN TO WRITE. TO A BOY:

What are you doing?

BOY

Blimey, you're dull!

ROGER (HE LAUGHS)

But that's funny.

CRIBBINS

What's so funny, new boy?

ROGER

They're makin' lines with their food. You're supposed to eat it!

CRIBBINS

Stop that nonsense, boy! Go stand in the corner.

ROGER OBLIGES, WAVES AT HIS NEW FRIENDS. MISS CRIBBINS
TURNS HIM AROUND TO FACE THE WALL.

ROGER

Thank you.

CRIBBINS

Class? Three plus seven.

THE CHILDREN WRITE.

Sixteen minus four.

THEY WRITE. ROGER SMILES.

Two times seven—

ONE OF THE CHILDREN HITS ROGER WITH A RUBBER BAND.

ROGER

Ow!

CRIBBINS

I'm warning you, one more piece of nonsense and I'll send you to the Headmaster's office.

Now, class: nine plus eight—

ANOTHER RUBBER BAND.

ROGER

Ow—e—they hurt me!

CRIBBINS HEADS TOWARD HIM WITH THE POINTER.

CRIBBINS

I'll teach you to disrupt the class, I'll—

SHE STARTS TO BEAT HIM, BUT HE GRABS HOLD OF HER HAND
AND SINKS HIS TEETH INTO IT.

Ow! Let go, you animal—

THEY STRUGGLE.

I'll get you, you little brat—

SHE MANAGES TO BREAK LOOSE, HEADS TOWARD HIM WITH THE
POINTER. SCARED, HE STARTS TO RUN.

RUBBER BAND BOY

Look at him go, he's running away!

CHEERS FROM THE CHILDREN.

ROGER RUNS. CRIBBINS CHASES HIM, BUT ISN'T FAST ENOUGH.
SHE GIVES UP. ROGER RUNS AND RUNS.
THE CLASS ROOM GOES OFF.

LOOKING BEHIND HIM, ROGER CRIES AND TREMBLES AS HE
GOES. DOGS BARK IN THE BACKGROUND. HE REACHES THE
MARKET, AND DUCKS UNDER A GREENGROCER'S STALL,
OVERTURNING THE TRESTLES. TURNIPS ROLL EVERYWHERE.
ROGER SHRIEKS, AND IS NABBED BY THE POLICE SERGEANT.

SERGEANT

What's this, what's this? I know you! Born troublemaker you are. Good thing I kept a record of your address. Come with me.

THE SERGEANT, ROGER IN TOW, KNOCKS AT THE DOOR. BOB
OPENS IT.

SERGEANT

(TO BOB) I told you he was trouble.

BOB

What's he done? Last thing I knew, he was in school.

SERGEANT

Well he en't any more. Mayhem, riot, criminal damage—
ROGER RUNS TO EMBRACE BOB.

ROGER

I wouldn't have got scared if the teacher hadn't hit me with a bloomin' stick—

BOB

Sergeant, this en't a desperate criminal, it's a little boy who thinks he used to be a rat. You en't going to use the whole majesty of the law to punish a little boy for a bit of mischief, are you?

SERGEANT

What about the damage to the turnip stall?

BOB

I suppose I'll have to pay. Make up an account and send it to me. But I'm not a rich man, understand.

SERGEANT

Rats don't belong in decent society. They ought to be exterminated!

HE GLARES AT ROGER.

And if you cross my path again you'll be in terrible trouble. Don't you forget it.

HE GOES.

JOAN

That teacher was evil.

BOB

Here, lad, stop quaking, you're safe with us.

BOB HUGS ROGER.

JOAN

I'm going to make you a bubble and squeak... Toad in a hole?...

ROGER

I don't like toads.

JOAN

Toasted cheese? Lovely.

BOB

My mum used to bake us ginger snaps.

ROGER

Snaps!

BOB

They're a kind of cookie, a biscuit, all sweet and spicy, and they crunch.

ROGER

Crunch!

BOB

That might be better than gnawing on a pencil, right?

ROGER

Right. I like it here.

BOB

Me too.

LIGHTS FADE ON BOB AND JOAN'S HOUSE.

TAPSCREW (READING NEWSPAPER)

"The Daily Scourge has learned that the Rat Boy has been taken to the laboratory of the Philosopher Royal for scientific study. Is he a boy? Is he a rat? Is he *dangerous*? Stay tuned for the results of the study." Curious....

BOB DELIVERING ROGER TO THE PHILOSOPHER ROYAL AT THE PALACE. AN EXAMINATION TABLE, A FEW LARGE, COMPLICATED INSTRUMENTS OF GLASS AND BRASS. ROGER LOOKS AROUND,

WIDE-EYED, BOB HOVERS, THE PHILOSOPHER LOOKS SUPERIOR.

BOB

You're not going to hurt him?

PHILOSOPHER

Certainly not! I'm just going to make some tests, you know. It's of great philosophical importance to see how a human child has reacted to living among rats.

BOB

He's a lovely little feller, for all his chewing—

ROGER IS AT THAT MOMENT CHEWING AWAY AT A NOTEBOOK
CHEERFULLY.

BOB

So be sure you take care of him proper, and make sure he gets back home to us.

PHIL.

He'll be home in time for supper.

BOB GOES. PHIL. TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO ROGER. HE
REMOVES THE NOTEBOOK FROM ROGER'S CLUTCHES.

And that notebook *isn't* your supper.

ROGER

I been to this palace before.

PHIL.

You don't say.

ROGER

Oh yes, I slid down the banisters. I come here with Mary Jane.

PHIL. WRITES IN HIS BOOK:

PHIL.

"Delusiona.." Now, Roger, let's do some mental tests. What is two and three?

ROGER

Two and three what?

PHIL

Well, if you have two things, and you add three more things, how much have you got?

ROGER

Depends. If they're really little things you still wouldn't have very much, but if they're really big things you couldn't even carry them.

PHIL.

I see. What's half of four?

ROGER

Cheese. Cheddar. Quarter of four's Cheddar too. Quarter of five would be blue cheese—

PHIL.

(WRITING) Primitive arithmetic sense.

ROGER

People come to the cheese stall and they ask for half a pound of number four. And that's Cheddar. Or a quarter pound of number five—that's blue cheese. I like blue cheese, it's got worms in it. Only sometimes they say "half" instead of "half a pound", that's how I knew what you meant. You got to keep your wits about you.

PHIL.

Oh indeed. And now I'm going to ask you some simple questions about the world we live in. What is the name of the Prince?

ROGER

Dunno. But I know the name of who the Prince is going to marry. She's called Mary Jane.

PHIL.

Mary Jane? No, sorry, she's called Aurelia. Lady Aurelia Ashington.

ROGER

You can call her that name, but I always call her Mary Jane.

PHIL.

(WRITES) "Cannot distinguish truth from fantasy."

ROGER

Excuse me, but you see that rope?

HE NODS AT THE BELL-PULL.

There's a loose bit of thread at the bottom, that could be dangerous, someone could trip over it and get hurt. So maybe I ought to chew it off, just that little bit of thread, so...?

PHIL.

Why not? (WRITES) “Gross and unnatural appetites.”

AS ROGER NIBBLES, THE THREAD PULLS OUT MORE AND MORE,
AND HE CONTINUES TO EAT BLISSFULLY.

I gather that rats will eat anything. But, I wonder, what might eat a rat? (CALLS) Bluebottle?
Come here, Bluebottle. Here kitty, kitty, kitty.

BLUEBOTTLE THE CAT ENTERS (EITHER IN SILHOUETTE OR
CARRIED BY THE PHILOSOPHER). ROGER LOOKS UP FROM HIS
SNACK, SEES THE CAT, SCREAMS AND DIVES OUT THE WINDOW.

PHIL

Where did he go? “Paranoid delusions with persecution complex....”

ROGER RUNS. AND RUNS. AND RUNS AS:

ROGER

Breadspoonbobjoanspoomthankyou...

LIGHT CHANGE.

JOAN

Whatcha doin’ out in the road, love?

BOB

Getting’ a breath of air. (BEAT) Lookin’ for Roger.

JOAN

He’ll turn up any time now.

BOB

And he’ll be hungry as a horse! Or a rat!

JOAN

Bob!

BOB

I was just makin’ a joke, love.

JOAN

Well *I’ve* made a Shepherd’s Pie.

BOB

Smells lovely. My favorite!

JOAN

But it's getting' dark! Where is he? It's getting past supper time!

THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER IN ALARM.

BOB

He'll turn up. He'll turn up.

THE BLACK HORSE TAVERN. CHARLIE, THE PUB OWNER IS
SERVING A PINT TO MR. OLIVER TAPSCREW.

CHARLIE

Cheers, mate.

TAPSCREW

Cheers. Fine weather we're having.

CHARLIE

Fine indeed.

TAPSCREW

Lots of sunshine.

CHARLIE

The sun's very nice.

TAPSCREW

Tell me, mate, have you heard tell of an odd story going round? Something about a rat? You ever heard anything like that?

CHARLIE

No. I used to be plagued by them here outside the pub, the filthy creatures. But the Mayor called in an exterminator. They exterminated everything in sight: rats, mice, cockroaches, fleas, lice—you name it. Clean as a whistle here now.

TAPSCREW

But they can't really exterminate them, rats and like. They're cunning. I shouldn't wonder if there's a race of super-rats down in them sewers. With fangs, like *that!*

CHARLIE

Oh, you must mean that rat-boy!

TAPSCREW

You've seen him?

CHARLIE.

Don't know, but I seen a boy running down the alley out there, looking furtive. Say, what's it to you?

TAPSCREW

My name is Mr....I mean *Professor* Tapscrew. I run a side show—I mean a “Scientific Exhibition.” Thanks for the pint.

HE DROPS A COUPLE OF PENCE, BOLTS.

LIGHTS FADE ON THE PUB, ROGER IS RUNNING. HE LEAPS OVER BOXES AND PILES OF JUNK AND CARTS. TAPSCREW SEES HIM. ROGER FINALLY SINKS NEXT TO AN OLD DUST BIN AND TAPSCREW NABS HIM.

TAPSCREW

I wonder, by any chance, you might happen to be the boy who used to be a rat?

ROGER

Yes, only now I'm a—

TAPSCREW

Good. Excellent. Come along with me like a good boy.

ROGER

Are you taking me to Bob and Joan?

TAPSCREW

Absolutely.

ROGER

Thank you.

HE HOLDS OUT HIS HAND, ROGER TAKES IT AND THEY GO.

BOB AND JOAN POUND ON THE DOOR OF THE PHILOSOPHER ROYAL. THEY ARE VERY WORRIED AND CROSS. THE PHILOSOPHER ROYAL HAS BEEN SLEEPING.

PHIL

Oh, you. I was just—

JOAN

Where's our Roger? What did you do to him?!

PHIL.

Nothing, madam. I gave him tests, many tests. I proved quite clearly that the boy is deranged—crazy. A psychotic personality disorder combined with fantasy-identification with figures of glamour, common among the lower classes....

BOB

I don't understand a word of that. You promised to bring him back home and you didn't. What time did he leave?

PHIL.

About three o'clock—through the window—

JOAN

Someone ought to smack you, but it wouldn't do no good— (TO BOB) Where to now?
THEY START TO GO.

BOB

Don't know.

JOAN

We aren't going to give up, though, are we, Bob?

BOB

You're a silly old woman. Of course not.

JOAN

Roger, Roger where can you be?

BOB

Roger—weren't that the name we'd have given our boy if we'd ever had one?

JOAN

Aye.

BOB

We'll find him, no matter how long it takes. But I'm blessed if I know where to start.

BOB & JOAN

Roger! Roger! Roger!

JOAN

This racket will scare him to death!

BOB

Roger!

THEY EXIT.

A LARGE BANNER PROCLAIMS “PROFESSOR TAPSCREW’S AMAZING RAT-BOY! THE WONDER OF THE AGES!” MARTHA (MRS. T.) IS SEWING ON A RAT COSTUME, THE PROFESSOR IS CRITIQUING. ROGER SITS IN A SMALL CAGE, CHEERFULLY CHEWING ON A BELT.

TAPSCREW

How’s the costume coming, Martha?

MARTHA

Brilliant.

Oh dear, that’s not nearly scabby enough. Make that tail six feet long, and cover it with pimples. Stick a few pimples on his face, come to think of it. You want your audience nauseated, love.

MARTHA

And whiskers. What’s the sign say, dearie?

TAPSCREW

“See this sub-human monster wallow in abominable filth!” Think I should make his cage larger?

MARTHA

Larger? No, love, the way he’s scrunched in makes him look bigger than he is, and more menacing. Besides, if the cage stays small, there’s more room for us to squeeze in more customers. Maybe he should have a nest. Hey, rat-boy, do rats have nests?

ROGER

Yeah, nice and comfy.

MARTHA

You heard him. Get some old bones from the lion-tamer, and toss ‘em in.

TAPSCREW

And we'll need a kind of greenish light. Here, d'you think he ought to have a name?

ROGER

I've got a name. It's new, I've hardly used it. It's Roger.

MARTHA

No name, love—a name would only make them feel sorry for him.

TAPSCREW

(KISSES HER) See? That's why I married you, you've got such a brain! Rat-boy he is. And he mustn't talk. Hear that, Rat-boy?

ROGER

I *like* to talk.

TAPSCREW

No talking, I said!

ROGER

You told me you'd take me to Bob and Joan.

TAPSCREW

Forget about that, you're *my* property now!

MARTHA

Here, try this on for the moment.

ROGER IS BUSY CHEWING. SHE GIVES HIM A CLOUT.

I said, try this costume on. First your legs, then your arms—so.

THEY WATCH HIM WRIGGLE INTO THE RAT SUIT. MARTHA
FASTENS IT.

It's a bit loose, but it'll do. Now swing that tail around, Rat-boy.

ROGER TRIES, BUT IS UNSUCCESSFUL.

He'll have to practice. Can't go in front of the public like that.

TAPSCREW

He looks too tame.

MARTHA

He wouldn't scare a soul, sad to say.

TAPSCREW

We'll have to do something about that. Fangs!

LIGHTS FADE ON THE SCENE.

NEWSBOY

Extra, extra, “Wedding of the Year”

“His Royal Highness Prince Richard and the Lady Aurelia married yesterday at noon in the Cathedral---“

JOAN AND BOB CROSS, JOAN WITH THE DAILY SCOURGE.

JOAN

I don’t care a fig for this wedding, though the bride looks sweet. All I want is to find our Roger.

BOB

No Found Children in the want ads?

SHE SHAKES HER HEAD.

JUST THEN CHARLIE CROSSES.

BOB

Good day, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Ta, Bob.

BOB

You en’t seen a little boy?

CHARLIE

Didn’t know you had one. But there was a boy—

BOB

What about him?

CHARLIE

A flashy feller with a big cigar was in my pub, asking about him. Seems he’s looking for a boy too.

BOB

What was this feller’s name?

JOAN

And what about Roger?

CHARLIE

What's the bloke's name...Tapstew...Thumbscrap...

HE STARTS TO GO.

Tapsnap....Screwtop....Ratrap....

HE EXITS.

BOB

Well, old lady, I suppose that's a start.

THEY EXIT AS THE LIGHTS FADE.

THE FAIR.

TAPSCREW'S STALL IS UP, WITH THE FINISHED SIGN, "THE WONDER OF THE AGE", ETC. HANGING ABOVE IT.

TAPSCREW AND MARTHA ARE ADDING THE FINAL ARTISTIC TOUCHES TO THE CAGE.

TAPSCREW

Martha, love, we still need more filth and squalor. Looks too respectable in there.

MARTHA

We need mud and some rotten vegetables. And dung?

TAPSCREW

No, love, there's a limit to what the public will stand. We'll draw the line at dung.

MARTHA

That's true. And *we* have to live with him. I've got an idea! What if we charge them extra to feed him? We'll have a feeding time every hour, special price. And the beauty of it is that we don't have to supply the food! They bring it themselves!

TAPSCREW

Genius! You are pure genius, Martha!

MARTHA

You'll need to paint an extra sign. Something about he'll demonstrate his loathsome and unnatural appetite by eating anything put before him by the public.

TAPSCREW

You've not been feeding him, have you?

MARTHA

No, He's not had a bite of food all day!

TAPSCREW

Brilliant, love. Look, we've already got paying customers.

A COUPLE WITH A SMALL CHILD (IN SILHOUETTE) PAY THEIR PENNIES.

TAPSCREW

Welcome, folks, the rat boy's coming out, but be warned, his savage and ferocious instincts make him dangerous. Of course you may feed him, if you have any stale bread or a rotten potato or two—

CHILD

Look, he's coming out—yuck!

ROGER EMERGES IN HIS RAT SUIT, DECORATED WITH SCABS AND PUSTULES. THE SUIT IS STILL TOO BIG, AND HE LOOKS RIDICULOUS—AND TIMID. THERE ARE CRIES OF REVULSION. HE SMILES.

WOMAN

Eurgghh—!

MAN

Fancy a rotten turnip?

HE THROWS THE TURNIP INTO THE CAGE. ROGER POUNCES ON IT.

ROGER

Thank you.

MAN

Hold on there! That en't no monster, that's a boy!

WOMAN

And he's wearing a costume—we want our money back!

TAPSCREW

Hush—yes—understood, money back—go.

HE GETS RID OF THE CUSTOMERS, TURNS ON ROGER.

En't you got no sense? I told you to keep your bloody trap shut! How can a rat say 'thank you'?

ROGER

I'm a boy now, and Joan told me to always say thank you when someone gives me

something—

TAPSCREW

Ungrateful scoundrel! After all I done for you! Pick you up out of the gutter, give you a home and a fine job—now the next lot of customers will be in any minute, and I want to see them horrified and disgusted!

ROGER

Thank you.

TAPSCREW KICKS ROGER AND LEAVES.
ROGER LOOKS AROUND SADLY.

ROGER

(MURMURS) Bread and milk, spoon, night shirt, snaps...Bob and Joan...

BILLY SNEAKS OVER TO THE CAGE, TAPS ON THE FRAME.
BILLY IS A NATTILY DRESSED LITTLE HOOD.

BILLY

Psst. Psst, Rat-Boy!

ROGER LIFTS HIS HEAD UP.

Yeah, you, I want a word with you. I'm going to help you escape.

ROGER

Does Mr. Tapscrew know?

BILLY

No, and it's best he don't find out. Here, I'm going to take this crowbar and pry open the bars. (HE DOES SO) Now see if you can wriggle through this hole. Keep wriggling—I think it's big enough. Come on.

ROGER WRIGGLE. HE SQUEEZES THROUGH.

Good work! Now let's run. We've got to get away.

ROGER

Are you helping everyone in the carnival escape?

BILLY

Just you, Rat-Boy, you're prime. Follow me.

THEY RUN, JUST MISSING BOB AND JOAN AS THEY ENTER.

BOB (YELLS)

Hey! You! Screwfish! RumTap! Corkscrew!

TAPSCREW APPEARS.

Have you seen our boy?

TAPSCREW

Boy? What boy?

BOB

Charlie down the pub says you was askin' about him.

TAPSCREW

Don't know what yer talkin' about?

MARTHA RUNS IN.

MARTHA

The cage, the cage---He's gone! The rat boy's broke out of the cage...

BOB

You've got our little boy!

JOAN

You'd best give him back, or we'll call the police!

TAPSCEW

Too late, he en't here any more. He's scarpered! And he broke our cage! That'll cost you a pretty penny.

BOB

You lock up our lad and want to us to pay when he escapes?

MARTHA

"Lad"? He wasn't a proper human, else he couldn't have et all that garbage we fed him---

JOAN LEAPS AT HER.

BOB

Hold on, love, we need to know where he's gone---

TAPSCREW

I'll send you my bill.

BOB

Let's go.

BLACKOUT ON THE SIDESHOW.

BILLY AND ROGER RUN IN.

BILLY

Right-y-o, we're safe. I'm fair winded.

HE TURNS TO ROGER, OFFERS HIS HAND.

Name's Billy, mate. Saw your show today. See, I'm on the lookout for a good wriggler, and I like your style. Rat-boy, you're a prime wriggler!

ROGER

Thank you.

BILLY

I got a job for you, Rat-boy.

Here, I brought you some new clothes. We've gotta get you out of that mangy rat-suit.

ROGER

Thank you.

DURING THE FOLLOWING, BILLY HELPS ROGER CHANGE INTO CLEAN CLOTHES.

BILLY

And because I rescued you from that Tapscrew, you owe me. You got to do everything I say. Hear me?

ROGER

Yes, sir.

BILLY

"Yes, Billy."

ROGER

Yes, Billy.

BILLY

You're the lowest of the low, en't you?

ROGER

(PROUD) The lowest of the low.

BILLY

Now listen carefully. Rats like you, you never die a natural death.

ROGER

Don't we?

BILLY

No, you got to be sterminated.

ROGER

Sterminated? Is that like school?

BILLY

No, it's awful, gruesome, it's the end of you. The Sterminator's a man who comes with apparatus—

ROGER

No! Don't tell me!

BILLY

Oh, I've got to, for your own good. What he does with his apparatus no one knows, but when he's done sterminating with his apparatus there en't a single rat left to tell the tale. They find 'em with twitching whiskers and their faces twisted all horrible-like—

ROGER

I en't go no whiskers.

BILLY

He'd get you all the same. It's a good thing you've got me to look after you, innit?

ROGER

Thank you.

BILLY

You do as I say and I'll keep the Sterminator off you. But if you disobey me, I'll be so upset, I'll forget.

ROGER

Oh please, Billy, don't forget, I'll be ever so good!

BILLY

Here.

ROGER PUTS ON JACKET AND HAT
ROGER

Thank you.

ROGER IS NOW DRESSED IN DARK CLOTHING, LIKE BILLY'S.
THEY ARE STANDING BY A WALL. ABOVE IS A WINDOW,
OPEN JUST A BIT. A RAIN BARREL STANDS NEARBY.
IT IS NIGHT, AND THERE IS LITTLE LIGHT.

BILLY

Well, my lad, you look quite the sharp article. And the moment has come for you to earn your living, right?

ROGER

Right. It's pretty dark out.

BILLY

We work in the dark.

ROGER

Am I going to wriggle tonight?

BILLY

That's your job, you're a Nocturnal Wiggler. And you have to be very, very quiet-like.

ROGER

Quiet as a mouse.

BILLY

Very funny, Rat-boy. Now here's the plan: you wriggle up through that window. It's a kitchen window—

ROGER

Is there food?

BILLY

Later, later. You climb into the kitchen, and then—on tiptoe, mind— you go to the front door and you open it, see? Then you let me in.

ROGER

Are we going to live here, Billy?

BILLY

No, the owners want us to do a little “removal job”

ROGER

A “removal job”, a “removal job.”

BILLY

Right. We’re gonna remove some stuff. Some old silver and some jewelry and the like. Understand?

ROGER

Yes, Billy. (PROUDLY:) Nocturnal Wiggler, that’s who I am.

BILLY

Shhh, quiet. Now, up you go. Here, I’ll boost you up to the rain barrel. Now...are you ready to wriggle?

ROGER

Yes. See, I’m wriggling. I’m wriggling.....I’m inside!

BILLY

Well wriggled, Roger. I’ll meet you at the front door.

HE GOES.

WE SEE ROGER THROUGH THE WINDOW *IN SILHOUETTE*. HE FINDS A BUNCH OF GRAPES, EATS THEM. THEN A COOKIE. FINALLY HE PICKS UP A STRING OF DRIED CHILIES. HE TAKES A FEW, STARTS TO EAT THEM, SCREAMS.

HE JUMPS OUT THE WINDOW HOLDING THE STRING OF PEPPERS, LOOKS AT IT AS IF IT HAD BIT HIM. HE IS STILL SCREAMING. HE STICKS HIS HEAD IN THE RAIN BARREL, DRINKS. AND DRINKS.

ELSEWHERE, A SIREN HAS STARTED TO WAIL. HE LOOKS AROUND.

ROGER

Billy? Billy...?

NO ANSWER. HE SENSES DANGER, RUNS. BUT NOT FAST

ENOUGH. A LIGHT SHINES IN HIS FACE. IT IS THE SERGEANT.

SERGEANT

What's this now?

HE BLOWS HIS WHISTLE.

ROGER

Billy, help! It's the Sterminator! Help!

THE POLICEMAN GRABS HIM, BUT ROGER BITES HIS HAND.
THE COP LETS GO AND ROGER RUNS.
THEN A CACOPHONY OF WHISTLES, SIRENS AS THE COP
CHASES ROGER. WHILE THE COP'S BACK IS TURNED, ROGER
FINDS AN ASHCAN AND DIVES DOWN INTO IT.
THE COP TURNS BACK, BUT ROGER HAS DISAPPEARED.
THE LIGHTS FADE. WE HEAR HIS VOICE, ECHOING:

ROGER

Bob...Joan...snaps...bread...milk....nightshirt...
LIGHTS BLACK OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

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