



WELL, WHERE'S HE GONE?

‘Oh, the wickedness!’ said Joan. ‘We find him at last, and look at this!’

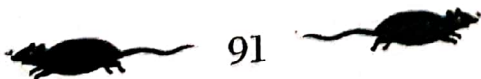
It was a cold grey morning. She held Bob’s arm as they stood in the rainswept fairground, gazing up at the picture of the Rat-Boy and his venom-dripping fangs.

‘Hold on,’ said Bob, ‘what’s this?’

Joan peered closely at the notice pinned on the door of the wagon.

‘Due to unforeseen circumstances the world-famous Rat-Boy will not be appearing today. Exhibition closed until further notice. Open again SOON with even more amazing wonders. O. Tapscrew, Proprietor.’ Joan read it aloud. ‘I hope Roger ain’t fallen ill,’ she said. ‘Knock on the door and fetch this Tapscrew out, Bob.’

Bob knocked, and a minute later a harassed Mr Tapscrew opened it.



'Can't you read?' he said. 'The performance is cancelled.'

'Where is he?' said Bob.

'None of your business,' said Mr Tapscrew, and would have shut the door, except that Bob had his foot in it. 'Oy!' he went on. 'Go away!'

'You better listen to us,' said Bob, 'else we're going to the police.'

'Let 'em in,' said a voice from inside, a voice that sounded to Joan like lemon marmalade with too little sugar in it.

Mr Tapscrew opened the door, and Bob and Joan went in after him.

'Well?' he said.

'We want to know what you done with our Roger,' said Bob firmly.

'How d'you know he was yours?' said Mrs Tapscrew at once.

'We found a witness,' said Bob. 'We know you took him. You can't deny it. So where is he?'

'Wait a minute,' said Mrs Tapscrew. 'What's your interest in the Rat-Boy? You claiming to be his owners? You'd have to prove it.'

'Course we ain't his *owners!*' said Joan hotly. 'What d'you think he is, a slave, or a dog, or something?'

'Not his owners,' said Mrs Tapscrew. 'Then I

don't see what business it is of yours. Show them out, Oliver.'

'Oh no,' said Bob, and when he stood still, nothing on earth could budge him. 'You listen to me, and don't you talk till I've finished. That little boy come to us and we took him in. He didn't hardly know nothing, but he was a good little boy, and he tried hard to learn. But then he got lost, and that's the last we knew till we heard of you asking about Rat-Boys. He may be a Rat-Boy to you, and a handsome living, I don't doubt, but he don't belong here, he belongs in a home where he's going to be properly looked after. So where is he?'

'He's a freak,' said Mrs Tapscrew. 'Half rat, half human. He needs a profession. We was training him for a fine career. He could have been the best freak of all time. He could've been famous. He had the finest career in front of him that any freak's ever had. He could've—'

'What d'you mean, "freak"?' said Joan.

'What I say. He wasn't properly human. He couldn't have eaten all that filth otherwise. He was a—'

'Filth? What filth? What are you talking about?' said Joan.

Bob could feel her losing her temper, and he put his hand on her arm.



‘Never mind the details,’ he said. ‘We want the main question, and the main question is, where is he?’

‘He’s gone,’ said Mr Tapscrew.

‘When?’

‘Last night. He bust out of his wagon. Lovely warm wagon,’ Mr Tapscrew said bitterly, ‘with every sort of convenience, and he goes and smashes a plank out the side. That’s going to cost me, that is. If you’re responsible for him I shouldn’t wonder if it ought to be you as pays for it.’

‘You lock our little boy up and send us a bill when he escapes?’ said Bob. ‘Don’t be daft. Let’s go and look at this wagon.’

Joan was feeling strange. It was Bob saying ‘our little boy’. He’d never said that before, and she’d never thought it, but now it was as if she was connected to Roger with the same sort of deep connection that joined her to Bob, and she felt herself saying it again in her head: our little boy.

Mr Tapscrew was reluctant to show them the wagon, because he had the idea that they wouldn’t think it was quite as comfortable as he’d said, but he couldn’t argue with Bob.

So grumpily he took his bunch of keys, and with Mrs Tapscrew coming as well to argue, they all

trooped round to open the Rat-Boy's pit.

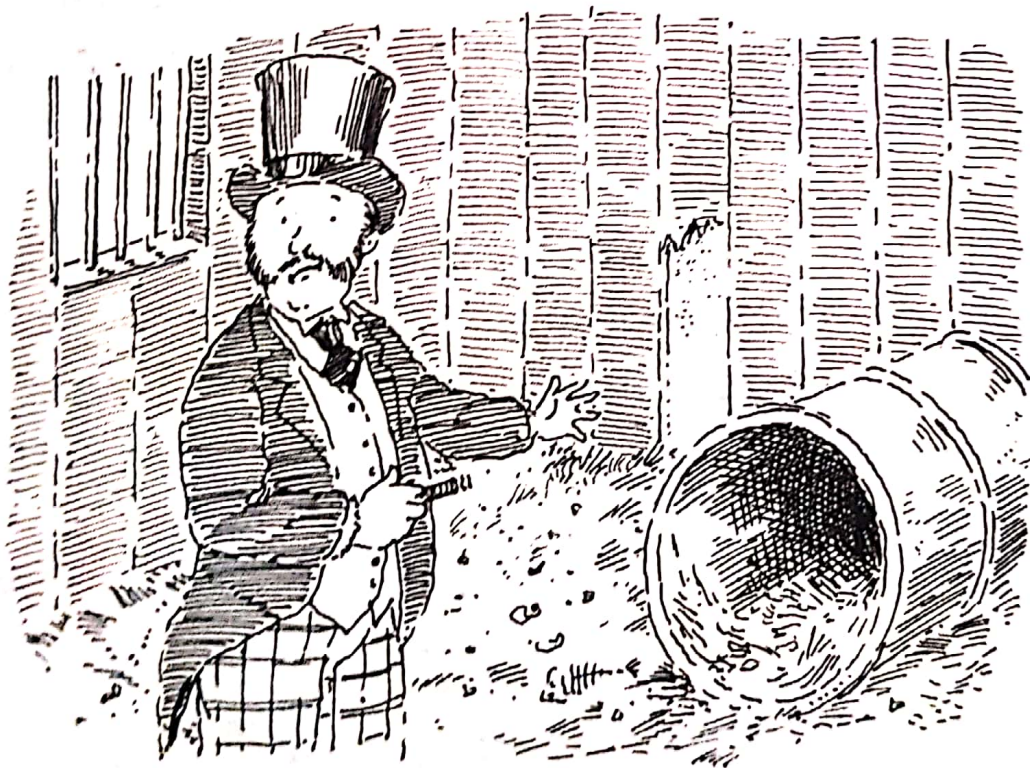
Joan waved her hand in front of her nose.

'You didn't keep him in here!' she cried.

'He wasn't very fastidious in his habits,' said Mrs Tapscrew.

'He didn't have anything to be fastidious in!' said Joan. 'And what's this? Is this what you gave him to eat?'

'No, no,' said Mr Tapscrew, shoving a piece of mouldy bread under a pile of straw with the side of his foot. 'We gave him lovely food – soup, stew – ever so nourishing. This was just professional food. A prop,' he added. 'That's what we call it. Props.'



‘Slops, more like,’ said Joan.

Bob was peering at the broken plank.

‘He never done that,’ he said to Mr Tapscrew. ‘You’re no workman, else you’d see in a moment. There’s no leverage in here. Come outside.’

They went round the back, and Bob bent down and pointed to some marks on the next plank down.

‘See that?’ he said. ‘That was a crowbar as done that. He never broke out. Someone broke in, and let him out.’

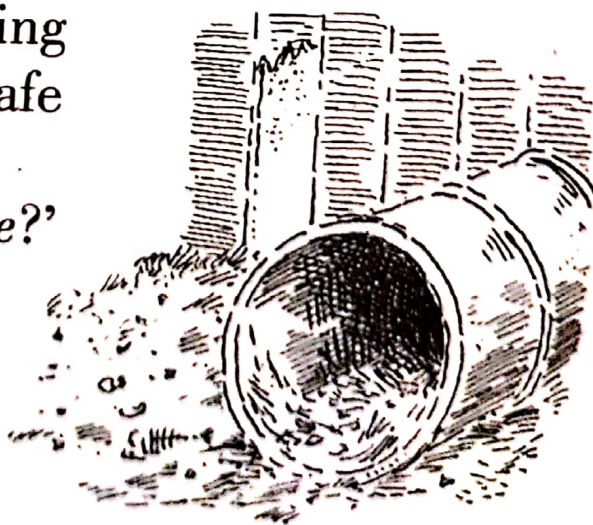
And he straightened up and faced Mr Tapscrew, and then suddenly prodded him in the chest with a forefinger that felt like a battering-ram. Mr Tapscrew staggered backwards.

‘Oh – ah!—’ he gasped. ‘No need for assault—’

‘You’re responsible for this,’ Bob said, and now his voice was like a battering-ram too, a very heavy one made of solid oak.

‘No, not at all! Not a bit of it!’ Mr Tapscrew blustered. ‘We did everything we could to keep him safe and secure!’

‘Well, *where’s he gone?*’





THE SHARP ARTICLE

The boys in the cellar slept for most of the day, and so did Roger. When he woke up, he found Billy shaking him and holding some new clothes.

‘Here,’ said Billy, ‘I got you some duds.’

‘Did you just buy ’em?’ said Roger, amazed at this generosity.

‘You’re a sharp article, and no mistake,’ said Billy. ‘I requisitioned ’em, that’s what I did. Now slip them old togs off and put these on.’

When Roger proudly stood there in his new shirt and jacket he looked quite different from the tattered little page-boy he’d been. He looked like a sharp article, or a downy card.

‘Now,’ said Billy, ‘you got to start earning a living. Me and my associates, we had a prime wriggler in

the company, only he got too fat. And one day he set out a-wriggling and he got wedged. Course, there was nothing we could do. He was beyond our help. We had to leave him there.'

'Did the Sterminator get him?'

'I couldn't say. Maybe he didn't and maybe he did. But that wriggler weren't as good as you. You wouldn't get wedged.'

'No,' Roger agreed, shaking his head vigorously.

'Well, that's why you caught my eye in the fair. And when you wriggled out the wagon last night, that just made me even surer. You're a world-class wriggler, no doubt about it.'

Roger glowed.

'Am I going wriggling today?' he said.

'This evening,' said Billy. 'We're nocturnal. Like you, Rat-Boy. You're a nocturnal wriggler.'

'Yeah,' said Roger. 'That's what I am.'

The associates were just waking up. They all admired Roger's new duds, and soon there were eggs and slices of ham frying on the stove, and Roger was allowed a chunk of cheese as big as his two fists together, which kept him blissfully gnawing for a long time.

After they'd eaten, and when it was dark outside, Billy said, 'All right, lads. Line up.'

The associates stood in a row, and Billy

inspected them carefully. He checked their shoes (to make sure they didn't have metal bits on the heel that made a noise, or broken shoelaces that would trip them up), their clothes (to make sure they wore nothing light-coloured that would show up and give them away), and their sacks. Each boy carried a sack, and he had to hold it up and show Billy there was no hole in it.

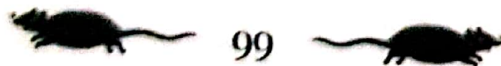
'All present and correct,' Billy said. 'Good lads. Now we got a new wriggler, so we won't have the trouble we had last time. And as soon as we're done, straight back here by different routes. Just go through 'em, to show you remember. Dozzer first.'

A boy recited, 'Through the garden over the fence turn right along the canal over the bridge round the castle through the market and back home.'

'That's right,' said Billy, and each of the other boys recited his route, all different. Billy turned to Roger and said, 'That's the power of organization, see. As for you, you stick by me and you won't go wrong.'

Normally, he explained, they left the cellar by climbing a rope Billy had fixed by the coal chute, but he wanted to check Roger's wriggling one last time, so he pointed to a tiny window high up in a corner.

'See how long it takes you to get through that,' he

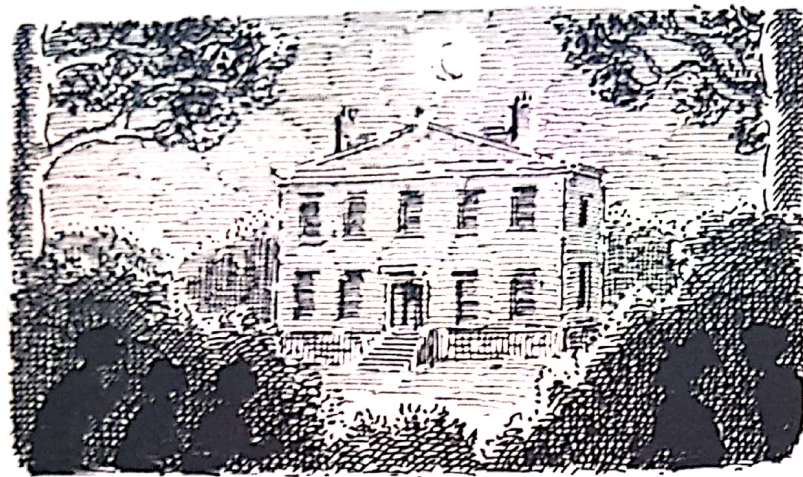


‘And mind, a good wriggler’s got to be as quiet
worm.’

‘Can do that!’ said Roger, and got through in less
half a minute, and waited excitedly for the
others to climb the rope.

Presently all the boys were standing quietly in
a line. Billy patted each one on the back and sent
them off at thirty-second intervals. It was so dark
even Roger’s keen eyes couldn’t see where they





REMOVALS

Half an hour later they were crouching in the bushes at the edge of a fine big garden looking up at the shuttered windows of a grand house.

‘Now this is the problem, Roger,’ Billy whispered. ‘We got to get in, but there’s only one way, and that’s a loose airbrick over the scullery. But you could wriggle through there in a second, I bet.’

‘Yeah, I bet too,’ said Roger.

‘Once you’re inside,’ Billy explained, ‘you got to look around and find a key. Most folks are careless, and servants are specially careless. They don’t like their masters and mistresses and they don’t take trouble for ’em. So you look around, and ten to one you’ll find a key on a hook somewhere, or a nail. Get that key and come and open the kitchen door.’

'I can do that!' said Roger. 'What are we going to do then? Are we going to live there?'

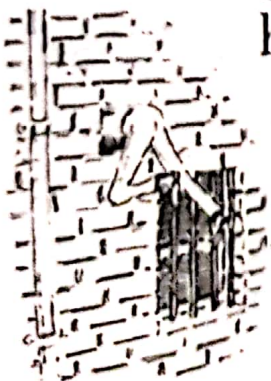
'No,' said Billy, 'the owners want us to do a removal job.'

Roger liked the sound of that, and said it to himself several times.

When everyone was ready, Billy said, 'Now, look closely at the wall just next to that little window and up a bit. There's a brick with holes in it there, what's called an airbrick. You take my crowbar – here it is – and get up on the window-sill, and jiggle it in beside the airbrick, and get it loose. When it comes out, you wriggle in and look for the key.'

Thrilled to be trusted with such complicated instructions, Roger took the crowbar from Billy. A few seconds later he was jiggling away at the crumbling mortar, and presently the airbrick did come loose. He passed it down to Billy, and then began to wriggle through.

It was a good thing he was a world-class wriggler, and probably a good thing too that he'd lost weight being the Rat-Boy, because several parts of him nearly got stuck. But even his widest bits were narrow, and what he remembered about being a rat helped too. It took him four whole minutes, but he got through in the end, to fall in a heap on



the scullery floor, covered in dust and mortar.

'I done it!' he shouted. 'I got in!'

'Good boy,' said Billy outside, very quiet and calm.

The associates, hiding in the bushes, all heard Roger's shout, and their nerves were all twitching; but they felt a glow of admiration for the coolness of their leader as he just spoke softly and didn't move.

'Now you're in,' Billy was saying, 'you got to move around very quietly. That's the way we do removals. No noise. Now look for that key.'

A minute went by. Billy didn't move. Nor did the associates. Another minute went by. Then there was a little scrabbling noise at the back door, and Billy was there in a flash, turning the handle, and the door swung open.

The associates came tiptoeing over the flagstones, making no more noise than a flock of shadows. Seconds after the door had begun to open, they were all in the big kitchen with the door shut again behind them.

'Well wriggled,' Billy said. 'Now, Roger, you stay here and keep watch. You know what to do, lads.'

The associates flitted away into the dark house. Roger stayed in the kitchen, wondering how to keep watch, but willing to do it, whatever it was.

Then, being Roger, he looked around for something to eat.

Because the family who lived in the house had gone away, and taken their servants with them, there was no fresh food in the kitchen. But he found all kinds of dried food in jars and packets and boxes on the shelves. At first he thought he'd found some very long and very thin patience, but they tasted quite different from the wooden ones and snapped more easily, sending bits of themselves flying all over the kitchen. If he could have read the packet, it would have told him he was eating spaghetti.

When he'd had enough of that, he found some dried figs at the back of a shelf. Then he ate his way through a packet of cream crackers, one old and flexible carrot, half a pound of rice, and some very tasty dried beans.

Then he made a big mistake.

There was a paper bag twisted up in a corner, with some light rattling things in it, and Roger automatically thrust them all into his mouth and chewed and swallowed. Of course, he'd never heard of chillies, and never suspected what these were. They took a moment to hit.

Then he gasped and goggled and began to run around in circles, flapping at his mouth in the hope of cooling it down. He couldn't imagine what it was he'd eaten. His lips and his tongue and his throat and his stomach were all ablaze. Parts of his insides

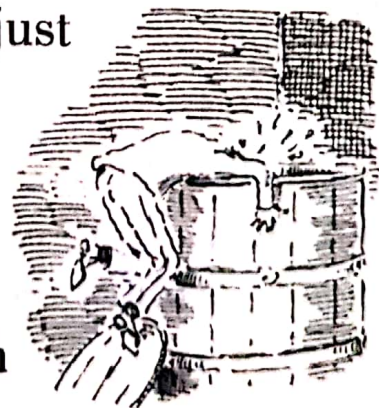
he'd never known about were sizzling. He yelped – he jumped – he squeaked – he gargled – he hooted – and suddenly the thought came to him: Water! Water! Water!

He ran to the tap, but the water was cut off at the mains, and only a hollow rattle filled his scorching mouth. He was making all kinds of noises now – mewlings and whinnies and yippings and hoickings and gurkings – and then he remembered the big barrel that stood just outside the kitchen door. He'd seen it on the way in.

He tore outside and scrambled up between the barrel and the wall, only to find a big wooden lid at the top. He hauled it off in desperation, dropping it to the cobbles with a crash, and plunged his whole head into the cold wet delicious moon-reflecting depths.

Gripping the barrel with both hands, feet pressed hard to the slippery sides, Roger swallowed and guzzled and swallowed and gulped. Oh, the relief! The marvellous coolness! The sweet wetness of his mouth! He swallowed till he was just about waterlogged.

As full as he could be, he loosened his grip and slid down the side of the water-butt. And he forgot all about his burning mouth



and turned his attention downwards, for something strange was happening inside him. He staggered slightly on the ground and listened to his stomach. All kinds of burblings and gurglings and swooshings and bubblings were taking place, as the cascade of water met the dried beans and the rice and sloshed about among the bits of spaghetti. Roger felt his turbulent belly with apprehensive hands. As the grains of rice began to swell, and the dried beans began to soak up the water and double in size, as the bits of pasta grew plump and fat, Roger's stomach began to strain at the buttons of his new shirt, creaking and rumbling.

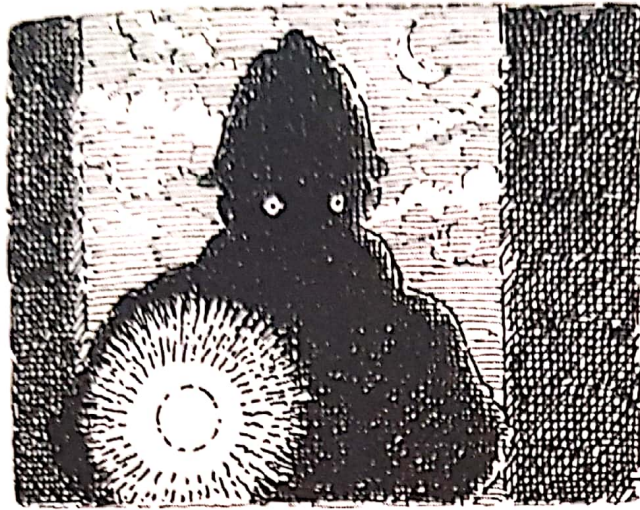
'Oh,' he said, staggering a bit, 'ah. Ooh.' Then he said, 'Hic!'

He'd never had hiccups before. He thought he was exploding. He clenched his teeth together to stop it, but the next *hic* simply came out through his nose instead. And all the time his stomach was getting fuller and fuller and fatter and fatter.

He staggered this way and that, gulping, hicking, gasping, snorting, feeling very sorry for himself indeed.

And suddenly a light shone into his eyes, and a hand closed over his shoulder, and a deep voice said, 'What's going on here?'





WHO'S THAT?

Above them, in a window overlooking the scullery yard, several pairs of eyes glittered silently and then withdrew.

Roger, dazed and bloated, could hardly think. But when he looked up and saw the policeman looming against the sky, he knew there was only one person it could be.

'Billy! Help!' he yelled. 'It's the Sterminator! Come and help me!'

And he sank his teeth into the policeman's hand.

The man gasped and let him go, to seize the truncheon at his waist, but Roger was out of reach already and running about in fear, looking up at the house and calling, 'Billy! Billy! Come and fight him!'

'More of you, are there?' said the policeman. 'Like rats in a trap.'

And he blew his whistle. That was enough for Roger. If the man spoke of rats, he must be the Sterminator, and the whistle must be his horrifying apparatus starting up. For all his loyalty to Billy, and despite his waterlogged stomach, the little boy turned and fled into the dark.

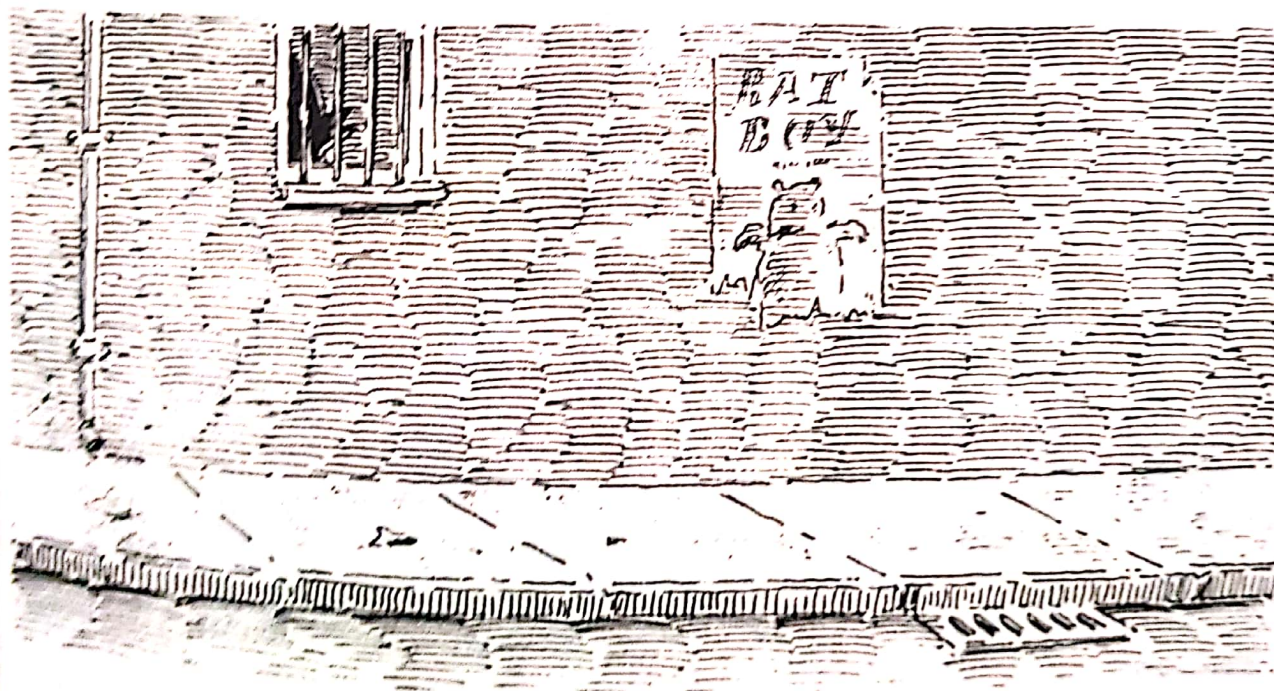
He didn't know where he was going. He couldn't remember the way back to the cellar, and even if he could, he didn't dare go there. In fact, everything in his world was soaked in guilt and misery. He had wanted to be a good boy, but it seemed that whatever he did, he was a bad one. He didn't deserve a nice dry place to curl up and sleep; he didn't even deserve to whisper *Bob and Joan – bread and milk – nightshirt – privy – patience* as he used to do.



Somehow the words didn't want to come to his mouth. He just moved his lips and tried to hear the little puffs and clicks and hisses they made and pretended he could make out the words.

So he crept through the dark streets until he came to a grating in the gutter, like a proper rat-hole, only human-sized. If he went down there he wouldn't have to bother anyone and he wouldn't do anything wrong. He could stop trying to be a boy and go back to being a rat. 'Once a rat, always a rat,' Billy had told him, and it must be true, because he certainly wasn't any good at being a boy.

So he lifted the grating and slipped down into the dark.



The Daily Scourge

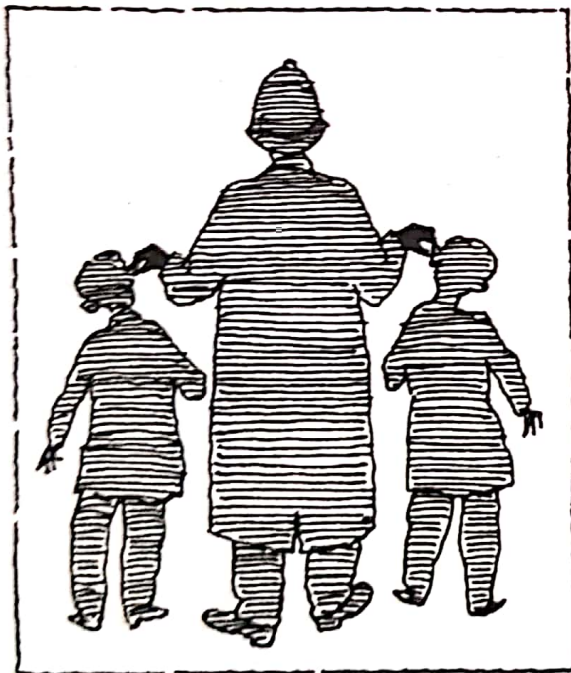
CRIME UP AGAIN

This is becoming a crime-ridden country – and it's official.

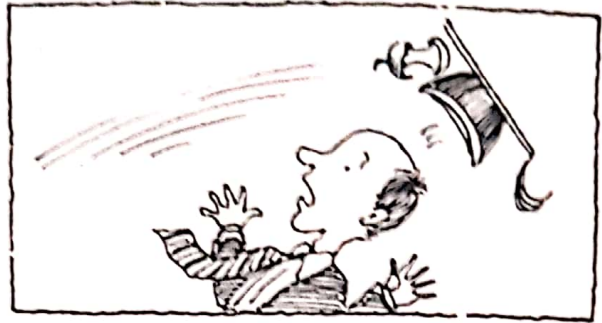
Crime figures have risen for the fifth year in succession.

Typical of the sort of lawlessness all too common today is the break-in at the home of the Earl and Countess of Ditchwater by a gang of young boys, all of whom were luckily caught red-handed.

'I blame the teachers,' said the Home Secretary.



'Ere, 'ere!



Rotten to the core

ANARCHY IN THE CLASSROOMS

But teachers are finding it harder and harder to maintain order and discipline over the bullies and thugs in the classroom.

'There is no respect for learning any more,' said a teachers' leader. 'I blame the parents.'

FAMILY BREAK-UPS

The traditional family is under threat. Family values have crumbled away. Changing working patterns, taxation, and violent entertainment are playing havoc with all the old certainties.

'There's no-one to give a moral lead any more,' said a parent. 'I blame the church.'

A MORAL VACUUM

But the church itself speaks with an uncertain voice.

'How can anyone be moral in a world of poverty under the constant threat of war and environmental devastation?' said the Archbishop. 'I blame the government.'

THE SCOURGE SAYS:

RUBBISH!

All our so-called experts are wrong, as usual.

Dripping and moaning about the state of the world and blaming everyone else – is it any wonder that our country is in a mess, with people like that in charge of it?

As for the rise in juvenile crime, it's easy.

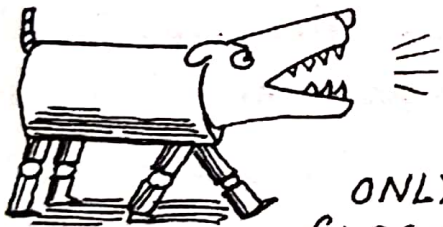
The kids are doing it, aren't they?

Then there's no need to look any further.

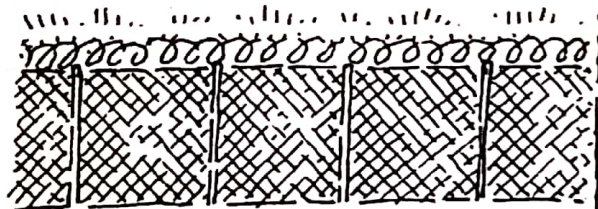
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