YOU WANT 'EM NAUSEATED

'That's it! *Professor Tapscrew's Amazing Rat-Boy! The Wonder of the Age! See this sub-human monster wallow in abominable filth!* That's it, paint him as ferocious as you can. You got all those words written down? Get on with it, then,' said Mr Tapscrew, slapping the sign-painter on the back. 'Now, Martha, how's that costume coming on? Let's have a look at that tail. Dear dear dear, that's not nearly scabby enough. Make it six foot long and all covered with pustules. We could bung a few pustules on his face, come to think of it. Oh, and whiskers.'

In Mr Tapscrew's caravan, Roger sat peaceably chewing a leather belt and watching all this activity. These people didn't mind him eating anything.

'Here! Ron! Make that cage a bit smaller. We can

Scanned with CamScanner

get more punters in the tent then, and the rat-boy'll look all the bigger. Rig up a sort of sewer-looking thing – big round pipe kind of effect for him to squat in – yeah, like that. Do they have nests? Do rats have nests? Here, you,' he said, nudging Roger with his foot, 'do rats have nests?'

'Yeah,' said Roger. These questions were much easier than the philosophical ones. 'Nice and cosy,' he added.

'You heard him,' said Mr Tapscrew. 'Get some rotten old bones off the lion-tamer and bung 'em in. Now – lights. We want to go for a sort of ghastly look. We want him to sort of emerge from the shadows. A pool of light near the punters, so he can come up front and do a bit of snarling when it gets quiet. Here,' he went on, struck by a sudden thought, 'd'you think he ought to have a name?'

'I got a name,' said Roger. 'It's new, I ain't hardly used it. It's Roger.'

'No, no, no. A wild sort of name. Like . . . Rorano, the Rat-Boy. What d'you think?'

'That's daft,' said his wife Martha, sewing on a pustule. 'If he's got a name, they'll only sympathize. You don't want that. You want 'em nauseated.'

'You know,' said Mr Tapscrew with admiration, 'that's why I married you. What a brain! Rat-Boy he is, then.'

Scanned with CamScanner

'And he mustn't speak, neither,' she said. 'Just snarl and grunt. Here, you, Rat-Boy, come here and try this on.'

Since Roger hadn't been listening, he didn't know who she meant, and went on chewing his belt.

'Give him a clout, Ollie,' she said. 'He's got to learn.'

Mr Tapscrew bent very close and said, 'Now you listen careful, else you'll be sorry. You ain't Roger any more. You're Rat-Boy, understand? Don't forget it. Now try this costume on.'

Roger was puzzled, but he did as he was told. It was fun wriggling into the rat-suit, and then squirming on the floor as Mr Tapscrew instructed. Martha watched critically.

'It's a bit on the loose side,' she said. 'I'll have to take it in. And he ought to swing that tail around. Here, Rat-Boy, swing your backside, get that tail swishing.'

Roger tried, but it just trailed limply on the floor. She shook her head.

'He'll have to practise,' she said. 'Can't go in front of the public like that. He looks too tame altogether. We'll have to do something about that.'

Scanned with CamScanner

TRUTH

The Daily Scourge

THE WEDDING OF THE YEAR!

His Royal Highness Prince Richard and the Lady Aurelia were married yesterday in the magnificent surroundings of the cathedral.

The bride was radiant in her white lace and satin wedding dress.

'She looks like a fairy princess!' was the verdict of the crowd, who had stood all night long to see the ceremony.

As the coach rolled back bearing the Prince and Princess, thousands of happy well-wishers waved flags and cheered.

A KISS ON THE BALCONY

Outside the Palace, the crowd had something else to cheer about when the royal couple appeared on the balcony to wave to their loyal subjects.

Princess Aurelia won every

Their eternal love sealed with a kiss

one's hearts by turning to her Prince and giving him a long kiss.

'You can tell they're really in love,' said Dorothy Plunkett, the *Scourge*'s royal expert. 'It's the real thing this time for the playboy Prince.'

GETTING MARRIED?

WIN . . .

- **A replica of the royal wedding dress**
- **A fortnight's honeymoon at the Hotel Splendifico**
- **A right royal make-over for your dream house!**

See page 5

Scanned with CamScanner

A Load Of Old Cod

Bob and Joan decided that after their experiences with the police, they'd be better off not going to them again, and they weren't very impressed with the other officials they'd spoken to on Roger's account, either. As they wandered home through the market square they felt sorely puzzled.

'You don't think he's run right away, do you?' said Joan. 'I think he was feeling that we were his home. I *think* he was.'

Just then the door of the Black Horse opened, and out came their neighbour Charlie, the dapper little greengrocer, staggering slightly.

'Evening, Bob,' he said. 'Hello, Joan. Here – you know that little boy . . . Where's that sleeve gone?' He was having trouble with his coat.

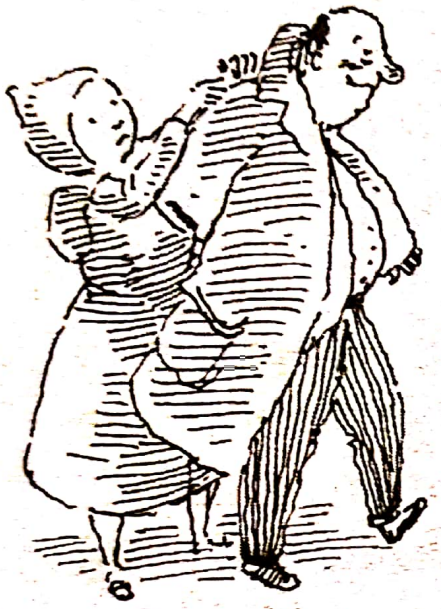
'Go on,' said Joan at once, helping him into the sleeve, 'what about a little boy?'

Scanned with CamScanner

'Aha,' said Charlie. 'I'm getting to that. Lot of talk about rats in the pub today. There was a flash-looking feller with a big cigar asking about 'em. Seems there's a monster about,' he added, stepping alongside very carefully, as if he wasn't sure the ground was there.

'Get away,' said Bob. 'What sort of a monster?'

'Half child,' said Charlie solemnly, 'and half rat.'



Joan's hand tightened on Bob's arm. Charlie was having trouble finding the end of his scarf, because it was inside his coat at the back. Bob pulled it out for him.

'Thank you,' he said, bowing to him and staggering a little.

'Well, what about the little boy?' Joan said.

'Ah,' said Charlie, trying to lay a finger alongside his nose and nearly poking his eye out. 'Coming to that. This man Stewtap – Plumbscrew – summing – he was looking for this rat-monster because he was going to put him on show, Eric reckoned. Eric seen the man before, in a fair, exhibiting a mermaid in a tank. And Eric – he paid his money and went in to see the mermaid, and you know what he says? He says – ooh Lor, listen to this – he says the top half was prime, but the bottom

Scanned with CamScanner

half was a load of old cod! Lor! What d'you think of that, eh?'

He was nearly doubled up, choking with laughter.

'On account of her tail,' he wheezed. 'A load of old cod!'

'Very funny,' said Bob, 'yeah, that's a good 'un. What was the feller called again?'

'And what about the little boy?' said Joan, stamping her foot. 'I swear, Charlie Hoskins, you're driving me mad. *What about the little boy?*'

'I seen him,' said Charlie, 'and I told the man about him.'

'What? Where? When?'

'This afternoon. Down the alley. Wossisname again – Tapstew – Thumbscrap – can't remember – he was looking for him, and I showed him where he'd gone. Ooh, I feel ill. Ooh, I feel awful . . .'

'Well, there's one consolation,' said Joan. 'You'll feel worse in the morning.'

'Oh, good . . . oh, Lor . . . Here,' said Charlie, clinging to Bob's sleeve, 'I'll get his name in a minute. Tap – Snap – Screwfish – 's no good, 's gone. Goo'night.'

'Well,' said Bob to Joan once they'd helped Charlie inside his front door and seen it safely shut, 'I suppose that's a start.'

Scanned with CamScanner

The Wonder Of The Age

Two days later, and many miles down the road, St Matthew's Fair opened for business. It was always the same fair, but in this town it opened on St Matthew's Day, so it was St Matthew's Fair; in that town it opened over Michaelmas, so it was the Michaelmas Fair; and it reached another town on May Day, so it was the May Fair. The stall-owners and merry-go-round proprietors, and the man who ran the ghost train, and the owner of the Death-Defying Wall of Doom all knew what time of year it was by what town they happened to be in.

They arrived late at night and by the light of many lamps and lanterns they set up their stalls and assembled their roundabouts and bolted together their rides in the cattle market, under the old town castle.

Scanned with CamScanner

Mr Tapscrew was putting the final touches to his stall as the sun rose over the market cross.

'No,' he said, 'we still need a bit more filth and squalor. It looks almost respectable in there. We need mud and rotten vegetables. We need dung, really, but there's a limit to what the public will stand, more's the pity. A good show ought to be a little ahead of the public, but not too far, and I think they'd draw the line at dung.'

'So would I,' said his wife. 'We've got to live with him, remember. Here – what about charging 'em extra to feed him? We'll have a feeding time, every hour on the hour, special price. And the beauty of it is,' she went on, 'we don't have to supply the food! They bring it theirselves!'

He looked at her fondly. 'Genius,' he murmured.

'Rig up a sign,' she said. 'Make it fancy, with all toothsome words. You're good at that.'

Less than an hour later, everything was ready.

Scanned with CamScanner

THE WONDER OF THE AGE!

Professor Tapscrew presents
The World's only genuine living

!! RAT-BOY !!

This half-human, half-rodent
altogether ABOMINABLE Creature
discovered living in the Filth of the Sewers
will demonstrate his
Loathsome and Unnatural Appetite
by *Eating Anything*

put before him by the Public.

Feeding Time: every Hour on the Hour.

WARNING:

The Rat-boy's Savage and Ferocious Instincts
make him
DANGEROUS TO APPROACH.

Wonder! Marvel! Shudder!

Scanned with CamScanner

'Smashing,' said Mrs Tapscrew.

The first visitors came soon afterwards. Seven people, grown-ups and children, crowded into the little booth and stared down into a pit lined with crumbling plaster and rotten planks. The floor was covered in dirty straw, cabbage-stumps, and bits of vegetable too decayed to recognize.

'Eurgghh,' said a girl.

'Look!' said a boy. 'He's coming out! Yuk!'

As the little boy pointed, something stirred at the back of the pit, and first there appeared a hand, then skinny arms, then a face—

'Eeeuuurrgghh! Yuchh! Eurghhhh!'

Roger had been thoroughly decorated with scabs and pustules and a couple of great red boils for good measure. His rat-suit had been taken in to fit him tightly, and as he scrambled out he swung his horrible leathery tail in the way he'd practised.

Cries of revulsion and disgust greeted him. He was delighted. He smiled up happily, showing the blacked-out teeth Mrs Tapscrew had painted.

'Here, Rat-Boy! Eat this!' someone called, and threw in a rotten potato.

Roger hadn't eaten anything that day. The Tapscrews had kept him hungry on purpose, and although he'd chewed a bit of wood and swallowed some straw, there was no nourishment in that; so he

Scanned with CamScanner

seized the potato at once, and remembering what Bob and Joan had told him, said, 'Thank you.'

The audience goggled. They looked more closely.

Then someone said, 'That's a boy.'

'He's got a costume on!' said someone else.

'He ain't a rat-monster at all!' came the voice of a third person, and with cries of disappointment and anger they called for their money back.

Mr Tapscrew, who was busy outside drumming up another crowd, came in hastily.

'Hush – yes – all right – understood – money back, certainly – just keep your voices down, ladies and gentlemen – here, Mrs Tapscrew'll give you the money out the back here – hush now . . .'

He ushered them grumbling and muttering, out of the booth, and then went back in to find Roger munching his rotten potato.

Mr Tapscrew bent down and hit him so hard the potato flew out of his hands, and he fell full length to the floor.

'What'd you do that for? Ain't you got no sense?

Scanned with CamScanner

You keep your bloody trap shut, you little fool! How can a rat say "thank you"?'

Roger, his head ringing, didn't know what Mr Tapscrew meant about the trap. He had a vague idea that traps were bad for rats, but he couldn't make any sense of it. One thing he was sure about, though.

'I'm not a rat any more,' he said, struggling to sit up. 'I'm a boy now. Old Bob told me that good boys say thank you, so—'

'Damn your Bob, and damn your thank yous! You'll do as I tell you, you ungrateful skellum! After all I done for you – I pick you out the gutter – I give you a home and a useful occupation – you go and spoil it with your niminy-piminy "thank you"! You ain't supposed to *thank* 'em! You're supposed to snarl and snatch and threaten! You're supposed to be a Rat-Boy, not a choir boy!'

'Ah,' said Roger, his head beginning to hurt now, 'if I'd knowed that I'd've done it. When I got changed into a boy, that's when I found out about being good, so I was doing that. When I was a rat I never knew about being good. So now I got to be a good Rat-Boy, only that's hard.'

'Oh, shut up, you sanctimonious little mumper! Just remember – snarl and snatch and threaten. Else I'll pull your bloody nose off. Now the next lot

Scanned with CamScanner

of punters'll be in any minute, and I want 'em horrified and disgusted. See?'

He kicked Roger for good measure, and went out. Roger felt a choking sensation in his throat, almost like a hiccup, and it might have turned into a sob except that he thought Mr Tapscrew wouldn't approve. And he did want to be a good rat-boy, so he gathered up the biggest bit of the potato and crawled back into the sewer-pipe to wait for the next audience to come in.

All that day and all through the evening he snarled and snatched and threatened, and the people threw him bits of mouldy bread and chicken heads and scraps of rancid pork and banana skins and potato peelings and rotten fish, and exclaimed with revulsion when he ate them.

Scanned with CamScanner

Goose Weather

After being St Matthew's, the fair moved on to a town fifty miles away to become the Goose Fair. At this time of year there were a lot of geese being fattened for Christmas, and autumn was getting on, so the evenings were longer and darker.

Mr Tapscrew was looking forward to good business, because people were more willing to come in out of the cold and look at an exhibition of curiosities than they were in the long summer evenings, when the rides and the merry-go-rounds did their best business. He paid for a new sign showing the Rat-Boy with an expression of savage malevolence, dripping green venom from hideous fangs. He even had special leaflets printed, and travelled ahead and distributed them in all the pubs.

As for Roger, he took to being a Rat-Boy quickly

Scanned with CamScanner

enough, once he realized what he had to do; and he didn't mind what he ate, so the fish-heads and rotten carrots went down easily enough; but there wasn't any goodness in them, and presently he began to feel a little listless. He didn't enjoy swishing his tail any more, and the rat-suit was getting loose.

Mrs Tapscrew cursed, and took it in half an inch.

'He ain't eating his scraps,' she said to her husband, as they sat in their caravan. The lamplight was golden, the stove was warm, the kettle was singing. Outside, the rain was lashing at the windows, and the autumn wind was howling.

'Mmm,' said Mr Tapscrew, applying a match to his cigar and puffing luxuriously. 'Think we ought to feed him proper, then?' he said once it was nicely lit. 'Bit of soup of an evening?'

'Don't be daft. You know how the takings go up at feeding time. If he's full of soup and stuff, he won't be worth watching. No, I think you ought to hit him.'

'Well,' said Mr Tapscrew reluctantly, 'I could. The thing is,' he went on, examining the glowing tobacco, 'I don't think he's normal. I don't think he understands the meaning of things.'

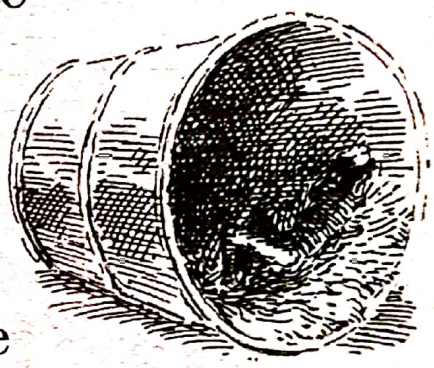
'You're too soft,' she said, snapping off a thread between her teeth. 'You're getting attached to him. That's your problem. Like that blooming mermaid.

Scanned with CamScanner

You were too interested in her by a long way—'

'All right, all right,' said Mr Tapscrew hastily. 'I'll do as you say, dear. I'm sure he'll settle down.'

Roger was trying to settle down at that very moment. He slept in his pit, curled up in the sewer pipe, and it was cold and draughty, and Mrs Tapscrew was sewing up his rat-suit, so he only had his tattered old page-boy uniform to keep out the cold. But he piled up some straw to keep out the worst of the wind, and nibbled a twig that someone had thrown in, and whispered the words he always whispered each night before he went to sleep: 'Bob and Joan – bread and milk – nightshirt – privy – patience.'



And soon afterwards he fell asleep.

But he hadn't been asleep for long when a knocking sound woke him up. It was coming from the wooden wall of the wagon, at the back of his sewer pipe. He turned round and pressed his ear to the wall, and there it was, knock-knock-knock – pause – knock-knock-knock.

And then there came a whisper through the cracks in the planks:

'Psst! Rat-Boy!'

Roger woke up properly.

Scanned with CamScanner

'Yes?' he whispered back.

'Listen,' said the voice, 'I'm going to help you escape. In a minute I'm going to heave this plank out the way, and you can wriggle through.'

'Oh,' said Roger. 'Does Mr Tapscrew know?'

'No, and it's better if he doesn't,' said the voice. 'Keep it quiet now, Rat-Boy. Here goes.'

There was a crack and a splintering noise, and all of a sudden a cold wind blew in on Roger from a plank-wide gap in the wall. Amazed, he peered out and saw by the flickering light of a hurricane lantern a boy a little bigger than himself, with very pale hair that hung like a curtain over his forehead. Roger admired him enormously at once.

'Come on,' said the boy. 'Wriggle through. I bet you can.'

Roger was naturally a good wriggler, and his diet had left him so thin that he had no trouble at all in squirming through the gap. He fell on the muddy ground and got up at once.

'Come on,' said the boy. 'Let's run. We got to get away!'

'Yeah!' said Roger, joining in at once.

They ran along between the stalls, and then the other

Scanned with CamScanner

boy turned and crouched in the shadows beside the ghost train, waiting to be sure the way was clear.

'Are you helping us all escape?' said Roger.

'Why, who else is there?' said the boy. 'I thought you was the only freak.'

'There's them,' said Roger, pointing up at the painted ghosts and skeletons of the ghost train. 'They're all locked in there like I was. We could let them out too.'

'You're a downy card, aintcher?' said the boy, looking both ways carefully. 'Right, come on!'

And he set off. Roger followed, looking back reluctantly at the still-imprisoned phantoms. Once they were safely in the darkness of the alleys under the castle, the boy stopped.

'Now,' he said. 'You call me Billy, understand?'

'Oh, yes, I understand,' said Roger. 'That's your name, Billy.'

'Yeah. Now I been watching you, Rat-Boy. I been in to look at your pit three times today, watching you wriggle. You probably didn't see me, but I was there. I'm on the lookout for a good wriggler, see, and I admired your style. I thought you wriggled like a champion. I got a job for you, Rat-Boy. So now you got to do as I tell you. Because I rescued you, and it's like you belong to me, you got to do everything I say.'

Scanned with CamScanner

'Oh,' said Roger, nodding, 'I'll remember that.'

'Yes, you better. You're the lowest of the low, you are.'

'The lowest of the low,' said Roger proudly.

'That's right. Now listen, and I'll tell you something you never heard about. You listening?'

'Oh, yes,' said Roger, eager to learn.

'Look over there then,' said Billy, and pointed across the alley. Opposite them was a rusty iron gate with some broken spikes at the top, and through the gate the dismal gleam of a feeble gas lamp cast a glow over some weed-covered graves and broken tombstones.

'See that in there?' Billy whispered.

'Yeah. Looks nice. I bet there's—'

'Shut up. It don't look nice. It looks horrible. Scary, that's what it looks. That's where they bury all the dead people. Now real people, like me, we die natural. But rats, like you—'

'Ah,' said Roger, 'I ain't a rat any more. I'm a proper boy.'

'Once a rat, always a rat,' said Billy, and he said it with such simple certainty that it impressed itself on Roger profoundly. He struggled with it, but the words wouldn't go away. He said them to himself to make sure they were right, and Billy nodded.

[illegible] me, and

Scanned with CamScanner

I don't like that. Don't do it again. I was going to say that rats like you never die natural.'

'Don't we?'

'No. You got to be sterminated. If people think there's rats about, they send for the Sterminator. And if they even so much as suspect you're a rat underneath, watch out. The Sterminator'll be on his way.'

It sounded horrible. Roger gulped, and remembered the police sergeant: he had mentioned the Sterminator, too. He trembled and managed to say, 'What's it like?'

'It's not an it. It's a him. No-one's ever seen what he's like. He comes along with his apparatus and—'

The word 'apparatus' filled Roger with a deep and horrible dread. Terrifying pictures of a faceless man armed with some shadowy engine kept thrusting themselves into his mind, and he couldn't keep them out.

'No! Don't tell me!' he begged.

'Oh, I've got to, Roger,' Billy said gently. 'It wouldn't be right if I didn't tell you about the Sterminator. What he does with his apparatus–' Roger shivered and moaned – 'no-one knows, but when he's been sterminating, there ain't a single rat left to tell the tale. They find 'em with blood on their whiskers and their faces twisted with a nameless horror.'

Scanned with CamScanner

'I ain't got whiskers,' said Roger, in faint hope.

'Wouldn't make no difference. The Sterminator, he can tell if someone's a rat underneath, even if they look like a boy in every particular.'

'Has there been other rats turned into boys, then?'

'Yeah. Doesn't happen often, but it has been known. The Sterminator's very hard on those cases. They're the ones he wants to sterminate most of all.'

'Like me,' whispered Roger, clutching himself with both arms.

'Just like you. It's a good thing you got me to look after you, innit? You do as I say and I'll keep the Sterminator off you. But you disobey me and I'll be so upset I'll forget. And the Sterminator'll have you while my back's turned, he's that quick.'

'Oh, no, don't forget,' Roger begged.

'Don't upset me, and I won't. Now you come along o' me and we'll find something good to eat. You hungry?'

Roger was now shaking so hard he felt his teeth chatter and his knees knock. He clenched his jaw and nodded, and gripped his knees to stop them, in case the sound attracted the Sterminator. There was a loose and swimmy sensation all around him.

'Follow me, then,' said Billy.

He led Roger down another alley, into a courtyard

Scanned with CamScanner

lit only by the gleam on the wet cobbles, and lifted the lid of a coal chute. A faint glow came up, accompanied by the smell of frying.

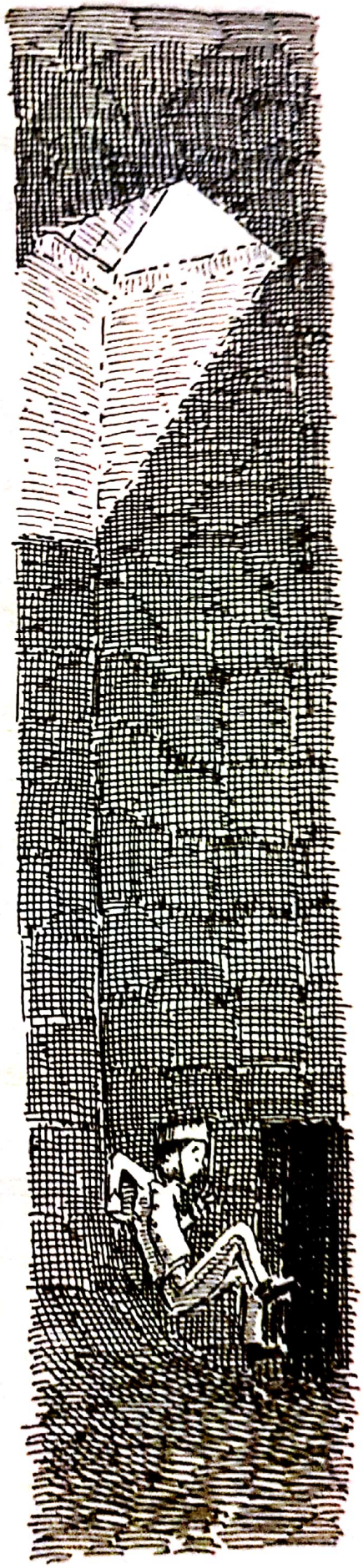
'Down you go,' said Billy, shoving hard, and before he knew what was happening Roger had slid and tumbled on the dusty floor of a cellar, where a ring of glittering eyes surrounded him.

A hand reached out and snatched him off the floor a second before Billy tumbled down the chute behind him. Roger saw half a dozen boys, all bigger than he was, and all ragged and dirty. The glitter in their eyes came from an oil lamp and from the red-hot glow of a stove, on which one of the boys was frying chips.

'This is the Rat-Boy,' said Billy, dusting himself. 'You remember.'

'Oh yes,' said one boy, and, 'Aha,' said another, and, 'So this is him,' said a third.

Roger understood that the boys were glad to see him, and he did



Scanned with CamScanner

what he'd seen other people do, and held out his hand.

'How do you do,' he said to the first boy, and they all shook his hand one by one, laughing. They were so friendly altogether, squeezing his arms, pretending to look for his tail, fluffing up his hair, that he thought he'd never been happier; and then they gave him a hot chip and roared with laughter when he burned his mouth and dropped it on the floor, and he felt so grateful to them that his eyes filled with tears and he laughed even harder than they did.

Scanned with CamScanner