

A CURIOUS AND INTERESTING CASE

It was a fine sunny morning, and the Philosopher Royal was taking a nap.

Normally at this time of day the King liked to chat with the Philosopher Royal over a cup of coffee and a biscuit, discussing things like why toast always fell on the buttered side or whether flies looped the loop before landing on the ceiling, but with the royal family away at the Hotel Splendifico while the palace was being decorated ready for the royal wedding, there was little call for philosophy.

The servant who woke the Philosopher Royal up for lunch was a cousin of the constable who'd arrested Roger, and he told him all about it, knowing the old man's curious turn of mind.

'Said he was a rat?'

'Said he *used* to be a rat, sir. He was ever so sure

about it. My cousin said it give him a creepy feeling all up his spine. He don't like rats.'

The Philosopher Royal made a note of the policeman's name, and after lunch he went to the police station to ask about the case. The sergeant was very impressed to see his card.

'Now when I see the word "Philosopher" in connection with the word "Royal",' he said, 'I wonder whether I'm right in guessing that you might have met the Prince's fiancée. What's she like? Is she as pretty as she looks in her pictures?'

The Philosopher Royal told him. 'But this boy who said he was a rat,' he went on. 'Have you got his address?'

'Not *was*,' said the sergeant. 'He said he used to be, but he wasn't any more. Oh, yes, it's all on file.' The sergeant read out Bob and Joan's address. 'But you be warned by me,' he said, 'that boy's a bad influence, rat or no rat. He'll come to a bad end.'

'I am most grateful,' said the Philosopher Royal. 'Good day to you.'

In the cobbler's shop Bob was waxing some thread. 'Morning, sir,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

'You are Mr Bob Jones? Guardian of a boy called Roger?'

Bob looked alarmed. Then he looked careful.



'What's he done now?' he said.

'I would like to see him. Is he at home?'

'He's in the laundry room, helping my wife. You got to keep an eye on him, else he eats the soap. But who might you be, sir?'

'My interest is purely philosophical. May I see the boy?'

'Well, I don't see why not. Step this way, sir...'

Bob led the Philosopher Royal into the laundry room, which was full of warm steamy air. Joan was stirring some sheets in hot water with a big stick, and Roger was feeding a pillowcase into the mangle and squeezing the water out, tasting it from time to time.

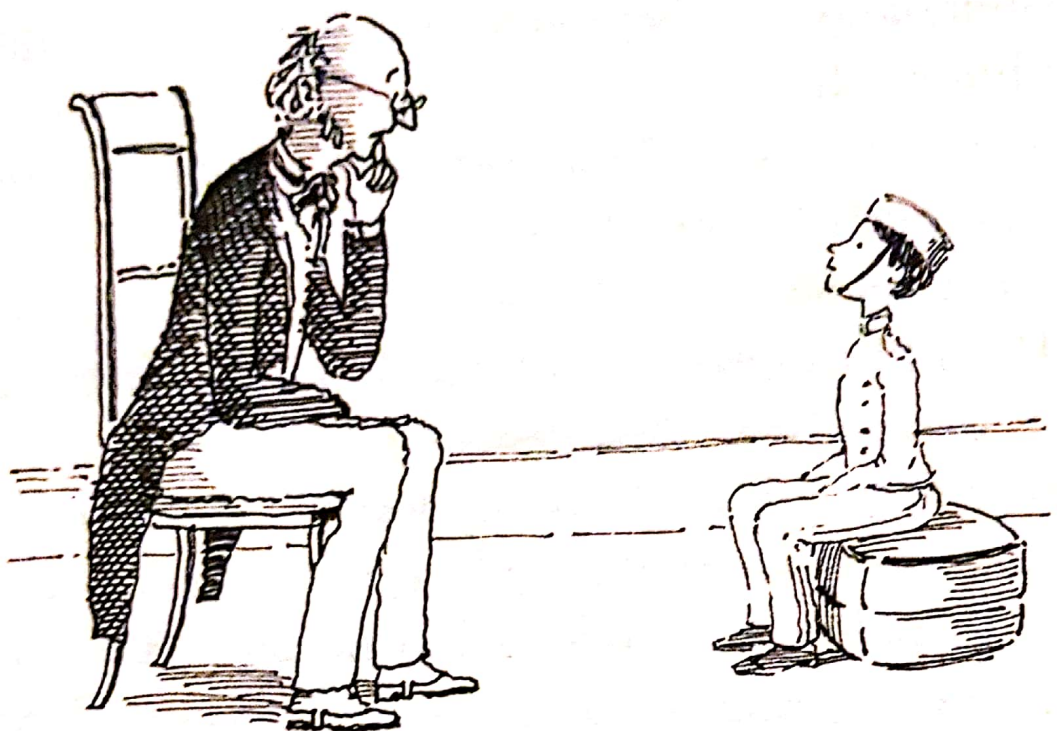
'Mrs Jones?' said the Philosopher Royal. 'And Roger?'

Joan dried her hands and gathered Roger close to her. He peered up at the Philosopher Royal with his bright black eyes wide.

'Did you want some washing done, sir?' said Joan. 'No, no. My washing is done by the palace laundrymaids. I was hoping for a brief talk with your, er, with the young, with Roger.'

'He's not in trouble, is he, sir?' she said anxiously. 'No, no,' said the Philosopher Royal, 'this is a purely philosophical investigation.'

'Well, I suppose you could talk in the parlour if



you liked . . .’ she said, and led them through to a little room that smelled of furniture polish. ‘I’ll leave you to get on with it,’ she said, ‘because I’ve got a lot of washing to get through. Now, Roger, you be a good boy, and answer the gentleman politely. No nibbling.’

When Joan had left, the Philosopher Royal sat down and looked at Roger: a little boy of eight or nine, perhaps, dressed in a uniform.

‘Now, Roger,’ he began, ‘why are you wearing a page-boy’s uniform?’

‘I dunno. I expect I forgot, but I’m not sure. If I could remember whether I’d forgot it I’d know if I had, but I probably forgot without remembering it.’

The Philosopher Royal was used to problems of

epistemology, so he made sense of that with no trouble at all.

'I see,' he said. 'Now, would you let me examine you properly? It won't hurt,' he added.

'I expect so,' said Roger.

The Philosopher Royal was thinking of the book he'd write about this. What a discovery! There'd been children brought up by wolves before, but no-one had ever studied a child brought up by rats. It would make him famous! Rubbing his hands together, the Philosopher Royal left Roger chewing one of the tassels off the lampshade and went to speak to Bob.

'You want to take him away?' said Bob, frowning.

'Just to make some tests, you know – weigh him, measure him, that sort of thing. To see how a human child is affected by being among rats. It's a question of exceptional philosophical importance.'

'But when he was among the rats he weren't a human child,' said Bob. 'He's a human child *now*.'

'Well, of course, he wasn't really a rat,' said the Philosopher Royal, thinking how simple these people were.

'H'mm,' said Bob. 'You bring him back here this evening, and don't you hurt him. I don't know what legal responsibility we got, but he come to us and knocked, and that's enough for me. And he's a

lovely little feller, for all his chewing. You look after him proper.'

'No question about that,' said the Philosopher Royal.

Roger had finished off all the tassels except one. Bob sighed and snapped off the last one and dropped it into the little boy's hand.

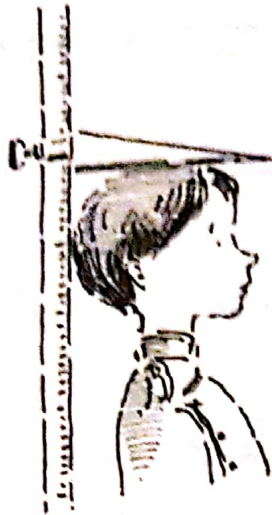
'I dunno how you digest some of this, I really don't,' he said.

'No,' said Roger. 'It's a mystery to me.'

'Now you go along with this gentleman and do as he says, all right? And he'll bring you back home in time for supper.'

Roger bowed good-bye to Bob and went out happily with the Philosopher Royal.





A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION

On the way up the palace staircase, Roger said, 'I been here before.'
'Are you sure, my boy?' said the Philosopher Royal.

'Oh, yes. I slid down them banisters.'

The Philosopher Royal thought: *Cannot distinguish truth from fantasy.*

Once in his study the first thing he did was to weigh Roger, and then he measured him, and then he listened to his heart, and then he counted his teeth. He didn't learn much, but he did notice that Roger had perfectly human teeth, not a bit like a rat's. There was no point in looking for a tail: the boy was human all the way down, no doubt about it.

'Now then, Roger,' said the Philosopher Royal, 'let's do some mental tests. What is two and three?'



'Two and three what?' said Roger, very puzzled.

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

'Ah, that depends. If they're really little things you still wouldn't have very much, but if they're big things you couldn't even carry 'em,' Roger explained.

'Yes, I see. What's half of four?'

'Cheese,' said Roger. 'Cheddar. Quarter of four's Cheddar too. Quarter of five'd be Stilton. One is Lancashire, two is Wensleydale—'

'I don't understand,' said the Philosopher Royal, writing everything down.

'Well, they come to the stall and they ask for a half pound of number four, and that's Cheddar, or a quarter pound of number five, and that's Stilton. I likes that one. You get worms in it. Only sometimes they say just half instead of half a pound, that's how I knew what you meant. You got to keep your wits about you,' he told the Philosopher Royal.

'Oh, indeed. Now tell me, when did you learn to speak?'

'When I changed into a boy.'

'Yes, but you didn't really *change*, did you? You were a boy all the time. Perhaps you *thought* you were a rat. But rats can't—'

'I never thought at all when I was a rat! I just was! So I never thought I was a rat. I never started



thinking till I was a boy. Now I think I'm a boy. But it's making me confused. I hope I don't get irritated.'

'All right,' said the Philosopher Royal nervously. He wasn't used to dealing with children, after all, and he might have expected them to be irrational. But even the King was more rational than this child. 'Don't get upset,' he went on. 'Now I'm just going to ask you some questions about the world we live in. Do you know the name of the Prime Minister?'

Roger laughed as if the Philosopher Royal had made a joke.

'No!' he said happily.

'And the name of this city?'

'I never knew it had a name. I thought it just was, like a rat.'

'What is the name of the King?'

'Ah, I know that,' said Roger. 'He's called King Henry.'

'And the Queen?'

'No. She's not Henry. She's Queen Margaret.'

'And the Prince?'

'No, he's not Henry nor Margaret. He's Richard.'

'Good. You know all their names. Well done.'

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

'Mary Jane?' said the Philosopher Royal. 'No, no. She's called Aurelia.'

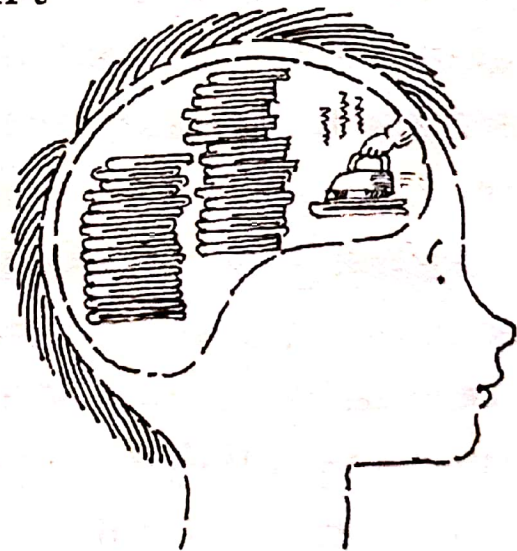
Roger looked doubtful. 'She might be called Aurelia as well,' he admitted, 'but in the kitchen they calls her Mary Jane. I do know that.'

The Philosopher Royal wrote down: *Fantasy-identification with figures of glamour. Common among lower classes. Indicates humble origin for boy.*

'What's that mean,' said Roger, 'what you just wrote?'

'I'm making notes,' said the Philosopher Royal. 'To remind me of our conversation.'

'Ah,' said Roger. 'You're probably a bit forgetful, then. Once you've learned to remember things you won't need to do that. You can keep 'em all folded up in your head. They don't take up much room,' he went on. 'As long as you fold 'em flat. I seen Joan do that with the sheets, and I thought, there's a good idea. So now I folds and irons all the things in my head and I stack 'em neat. I know where they all are.'



'Remarkable,' said the Philosopher Royal, and wrote: *Insane. Sensory-intellectual delusions, paranoid in nature.*



Roger was eyeing the bell pull in the corner.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'but you know that rope? Well, there's a loose bit of thread at the bottom. That could be dangerous, someone could trip over that and hurt themselves. So maybe I ought to chew it off, just that little bit of thread. If it would help,' he added.

'Well . . . ' said the Philosopher Royal, and then, 'Yes. Why not?'

He turned a page and wrote: *Gross and unnatural appetite.*

Roger nibbled off the bit of thread, which was almost as long as his fingernail, and then found that he'd accidentally pulled loose a longer piece, so he had to chew that too; and that brought with it a very tasty knot, flavoured with a length of gold thread from the tassel, and before a minute had gone by Roger was blissfully eating his way up the bell pull itself.

Seeing him eating so well, the Philosopher Royal turned his mind to thoughts of food and nourishment, and what rats eat, and then by a logical process to the question of what eats rats.

'Aha!' he said. 'Wait here, my boy. Don't go away.'

And he left the study and hurried to his sitting room, where he scooped up his cat Bluebottle and hurried back. Bluebottle was not a philosophical



cat; she was lazy and greedy and exceptionally stupid. She had no objection to being picked up and carried somewhere else, because there was very little in her head to object with. So, tucked under the Philosopher Royal's arm, she just dangled her back legs and stuck out her front ones and half-opened her eyes . . .

Until they went into the study.

As soon as Roger saw the cat, he shrieked and leapt away. The window was open, and he dived out and into a flower bed and then scrambled to his feet and ran, and Bluebottle chased after him, automatically.

But she was a lazy cat, and when she saw she'd have to run further than the edge of the lawn she slowed down and gave up. She forgot about him almost at once and sat down to groom herself, while the Philosopher Royal stared out of the window, amazed, and Roger vanished out of the palace gates.





MR TAPSCREW

In the market that day there happened to be a man from a fair. The fair was in the next town at the time, and it moved around, as fairs do, but this man had come to Roger's town because he'd heard a rumour that he wanted to investigate. He was the proprietor of one of the shows in the fair, and his name was Oliver Tapscrew.

Early that evening, Mr Tapscrew was standing at the bar of the Black Horse, a pint of bitter in his hand and a fat cigar in his mouth, talking to the owner of the jellied-eel stall from the market.

'I heard tell of something odd recently,' said Mr Tapscrew. 'I dunno if I heard it right – something about a boy who was really a rat. You ever heard of anything like that?'

'Rats?' said the jellied-eel man. 'No. Used to be a

plague of 'em. But the Mayor and Corporation got a first-class firm of exterminators in. They exterminated everything in sight: rats, mice, cockroaches, fleas, lice, you name it. Wiped 'em out. Clean as a whistle. Place is so clean now I don't even have to wipe my stall down. Thanks, I'll have another.'

Mr Tapscrew reminded himself not to eat any jellied eels while he was here.

'They ain't really been exterminated,' said a horse-dealer. 'Rats and mice. You couldn't. They're cunning, they are, they got cunning blood. They take samples of the poison and they learn how to digest it. I shouldn't wonder if there's a race of super-rats down the sewers. With fangs like *that*. And a hatred for the whole human race. The rats' time is coming, you mark my words.'

Mr Tapscrew listened, and bought more pints of beer, and noticed with satisfaction that although nobody *knew* anything about rats, or boys who'd been rats, they all enjoyed a good shiver when they thought about them. Good shivers were good business.

He sipped his beer, while his fertile brain played with the notion of rats: super-rats, rat-boys, a whole freak-show of rat-humans, owned and trained and exhibited by Oliver Tapscrew – no, Professor Tapscrew – that would look good on the sign. He'd



it painted as soon as he got back.

Then he felt a hand on his arm, and turned to see a small greengrocer with a dapper little moustache. 'Excuse me,' said the greengrocer, 'that rat-boy was talking about — I just seen him.'

'My dear fellow!' said Mr Tapscrew. 'D'you know, then? Where is he?'

'If he's who I think he is,' said the small man, 'he's been took in by neighbours of mine. You wouldn't think he was a rat, really, he looks just like a boy. But he's got an unnatural appetite. There's something uncanny about it, mark my words.'

'Did you say you'd seen him?' said Mr Tapscrew. 'Yes. Just going down that alley over there, looking alive.'

'Thanks,' said Mr Tapscrew. 'Have a drink, old man!'

He thrust some money into the greengrocer's hand, and hurried off down the alley.

It was a grubby little place between the municipal workhouse and the Hotel Salmagundi. At first Tapscrew couldn't see a living creature there, but hearing a soft clatter, he stopped to look behind a mound of empty cardboard boxes, wine bottles,

erton. He looked up, and Mr Tapscrew noted with pleasure the boy's quick-moving jaws, the appalling ink from the dustbin, and the bright black eyes that looked back at him.

'Tell me,' said Mr Tapscrew, 'I wonder if by any chance you might happen to be the boy who used to be a rat?'

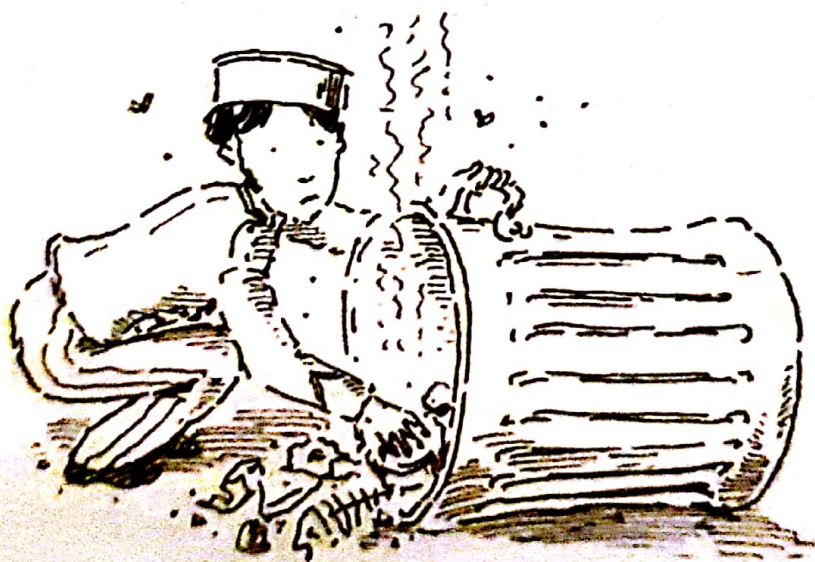
'Yes,' said Roger. 'Only now I'm—'

'Good! Excellent!'

'I didn't mean to knock the dustbin over, only —'

'Don't worry about it, dear boy. Come with me!'

Reluctantly abandoning the last of the smoked salmon mousse that had been in the dustbin for six days, Roger took Mr Tapscrew's hand and walked away with him, because he thought he ought to be a good boy.





WHERE'S HE GONE?

When Roger didn't come back, Bob and Joan weren't sure when they should start to worry. On the one hand he was with the Philosopher Royal, who was sure to be looking after him properly, but on the other hand the man had said he'd bring Roger back, and he hadn't.

And on the third hand there was the fact that Bob and Joan had never had a child to look after before, and didn't know what to expect or whether they ought to worry. And on the fourth hand there was the fact that they were worrying about him already, because they were very fond of him, strange as he was.

It was a good thing they only had four hands between them, or they'd have been even more worried. Joan even snapped at Bob, a thing she hardly ever did.



'What are you wasting your time with them silly slippers for?' she said. 'No-one's got feet that small, and what that leather must have cost I can't imagine.'

Bob was putting the last stitches in the scarlet slippers he'd been making. He looked up over his glasses and said, 'If a cobbler can't do something for the pure craftsmanship of it, it's a poor thing. They'll come in useful one day, don't you fret.'



He wasn't cross; he knew she was worried. When the old cuckoo clock struck nine, Bob put the slippers away and took off his glasses.

'Well, that's late enough,' he said. 'I'm not going to wait any more. I'm going down the palace to see what that man's been up to.'

'I'll come with you,' said Joan. 'I can't bear sitting waiting.'

'Funny, innit,' said Bob, 'we been sitting by this fire for thirty-two years, but it never seemed like waiting before.'

They put on their hats and coats and went to the tradesmen's entrance of the palace. Some soldiers were playing football in the courtyard, and another was smoking and reading the paper in a sentry box, and took no notice. Bob and Joan could hear



giggling from somewhere inside, and the sound of glasses clinking.

'Yeah?' said the maid who opened the door, and hiccuped. 'Oops!'

'We come for the little boy,' said Bob firmly. 'It's his bedtime. The gentleman who wanted to investigate him must be finished by now.'

The maid vanished, shutting them outside. After a few minutes, during which Bob and Joan had to blow on their hands and stamp up and down to keep warm, she came back.

'Dr Prosser says he ran home,' she said, and was about to close the door when Bob put his foot in it.

'No he didn't,' said Bob. 'I want a word with Dr Prosser.'

The maid reluctantly opened the door. There was a party going on in the servants' hall, and she hurried them past and along to the door of the Philosopher Royal's apartment.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' said the Philosopher Royal when he opened the door.

'Where's our Roger?' said Joan.

'He ran away. Couldn't concentrate. Just leapt out of the window and ran home.'

'Ah, but he didn't,' said Bob. 'He never turned up.'

'And what did you do to him?' said Joan.

'A number of tests. They showed quite clearly

that the boy is deranged. A psychotic personality disorder, with paranoid delusions combined with fantasy-identification with figures of glamour. Marked retardation of intellectual development. In short, he has a hopeless future, though he might find a useful occupation in some humble manual activity.'

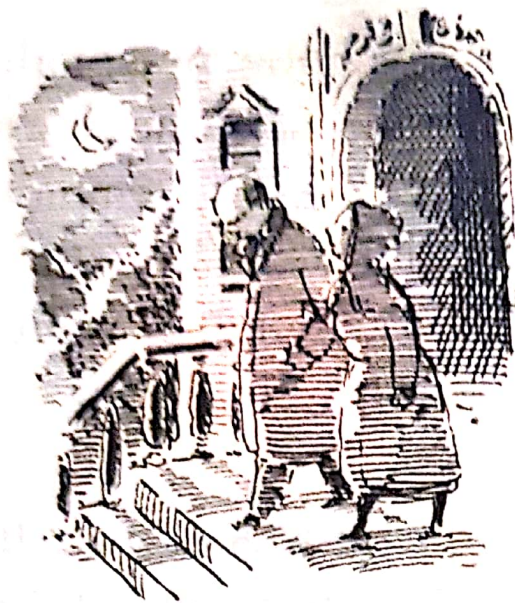
'Never mind that,' said Bob, who was getting hot and bothered. 'We didn't send him to you to be tested because we wanted it. *You* wanted it. You come and took him, and now you've lost him, and we want him back. What are you going to do about it?'

'Ah,' said the Philosopher Royal cleverly, smiling and shaking his head, 'no, no, no. I think you're making an elementary error about the nature of language. When you say, "You've lost him," that seems to imply the notion of fault, of blame, of the whole discredited apparatus of causality. We don't talk in those terms any more. As a matter of fact, meaning itself is a problematic concept when nothing is final and everything is a matter of interpretation into terms which themselves—'

'I don't understand a word of that,' said Bob, 'but I tell you what, it makes me feel sick. You lost that little boy, and there's an end of it. When did he go? You can say that, I suppose?'

The Philosopher Royal gulped.





‘About three o’clock,’ he said.

Bob turned and walked away, but Joan hadn’t finished.

‘Someone oughter smacked you when you still did believe in things,’ she said. ‘It’s too

late now, else I’d do it myself.’

And she took Bob’s arm and they went down the silent stairs, past the laughter in the servants’ hall, past the soldiers playing football in the moonlight, and out of the palace grounds.

‘Where to now?’ said Bob, as they looked down over the chilly rooftops in the frosty air.

‘Don’t know,’ she said. ‘We ain’t just going to give up though, are we, Bob?’

‘You’re a silly old woman,’ he said. ‘We’ll find him, never mind how long it takes. We just need a clue, that’s all. But I’m blessed if I know where to start.’

