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I Was a Rat!

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This story is for Jack, Kate and Rosie

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TRUTH
The Daily Scourge

LOVE AT THE BALL

by our Court Correspondent

Yes – it's official!

Hunky Prince Richard has found a bride at last!

At midnight last night, the Palace announced the engagement of His Royal Highness Prince Richard to the Lady Aurelia Ashington.

'We are very happy,' said the Prince.

It is understood that the Royal Wedding will be celebrated very soon.

Our Romance Correspondent writes:

It was like something out of a fairy tale. The charming prince, the mysterious girl who seemed to vanish into nowhere only to be found by the merest chance . . .

They met at the Midsummer Ball. To the music of a shimmering waltz, they danced like thistledown, and they only had eyes for each other.

'I've never seen him so in love,' said a close friend of the Prince. 'I think this time it's the real thing.'

It was certainly fast. By midnight, they were head over heels in love, and it only took another day for the engagement to be made official.

PRINCE RICHARD – THE LOVER

A fact-file of the playboy prince's previous girlfriends – *page 2,3,4,5,6,7,8*

LADY AURELIA – WHERE DOES SHE COME FROM?

Our reporters investigate the background of the lovely young Princess-to-be – *page 9*



Stars in their eyes!



I Was A Rat!

Old Bob and his wife Joan lived by the market in the house where his father and grandfather and great-grandfather had lived before him, cobblers all of them, and cobbling was Bob's trade too. Joan was a washerwoman, like her mother and her grandmother and her great-grandmother, back as far as anyone could remember.

And if they'd had a son, he would have become a cobbler in his turn, and if they'd had a daughter, she would have learned the laundry trade, and so the world would have gone on. But they never had a child, whether boy or girl, and now they were getting old, it seemed less and less likely that they ever would, much as they would have liked to.

One evening as old Joan wrote a letter to her niece and old Bob sat trimming the heels of a pair

of tiny scarlet slippers he was making for the love of it, there came a knock at the door.

Bob looked up with a jump. 'Was that someone knocking?' he said. 'What's the time?'

The cuckoo clock answered him before Joan could: ten o'clock. As soon as it had finished cuckooing, there came another knock, louder than before.

Bob lit a candle and went through the dark shop to unlock the front door.

Standing in the moonlight was a little boy in a page's uniform. It had once been smart, but it was sorely torn and stained, and the boy's face was scratched and grubby.

'Bless my soul!' said Bob. 'Who are you?'

'I was a rat,' said the little boy.

'What did you say?' said Joan, crowding in behind her husband.

'I was a rat,' said the little boy again.



'You were a – go on with you! Where do you live?' she said. 'What's your name?'

But the little boy could only say, 'I was a rat.'

The old couple took him into the kitchen, because the

night was cold, and sat him down by the fire. He looked at the flames as if he'd never seen anything like them before.

'What should we do?' whispered Bob.

'Feed the poor little soul,' Joan whispered back. 'Bread and milk, that's what my mother used to make for us.'

So she put some milk in a pan to heat by the fire and broke some bread into a bowl, and old Bob tried to find out more about the boy.

'What's your name?' he said.

'Haven't got a name.'

'Why, everyone's got a name! I'm Bob, and this is Joan, and that's who we are, see. You sure you haven't got a name?'

'I lost it. I forgot it. I was a rat,' said the boy, as if that explained everything.

'Oh,' said Bob. 'You got a nice uniform on, anyway. I expect you're in service, are you?'

The boy looked at his tattered uniform, puzzled.

'Dunno,' he said finally. 'Dunno what that means. I expect I am, probably.'

'In service,' said Bob, 'that means being someone's servant. Have a master or a mistress and run errands for 'em. Page-boys, like you, they usually go along with the master or mistress in a coach, for instance.'

'Ah,' said the boy. 'Yes, I done that, I was a good page-boy, I done everything right.'

'Course you did,' said Bob, shifting his chair along as Joan came to the table with the bowl of warm bread and milk.

She put it in front of the boy and without a second's pause he put his face right down into the bowl and began to guzzle it up directly, his dirty little hands gripping the edge of the table.

'What you doing?' said Joan. 'Dear oh dear! You don't eat like that. Use the spoon!'

The boy looked up, milk in his eyebrows, bread up his nose, his chin dripping.

'He doesn't know anything, poor little thing,' said Joan. 'Come to the sink, my love, and we'll wash you. Grubby hands and all. Look at you!'

The boy tried to look at himself, but he was reluctant to leave the bowl.

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

'It'll still be here when you come back,' said Bob. 'I've had my supper already, I'll look after it for you.'

The boy looked wonder-struck at this idea. He watched over his shoulder as Joan led him to the kitchen sink and tipped in some water from the kettle, and while she was washing him he kept twisting his wet face round to look from Bob to the bowl and back again.

'That's better,' said Joan, rubbing him dry. 'Now you be a good boy and eat with the spoon.'

'Yes, I will,' he said, nodding.

'I'm surprised they didn't teach you manners when you was a page-boy,' she said.

'I was a rat,' he said.

'Oh, well, rats don't have manners. Boys do,' she told him. 'You say thank you when someone gives you something, see, that's good manners.'

'Thank you,' he said, nodding hard.

'That's a good boy. Now come and sit down.'

So he sat down, and Bob showed him how to use the spoon. He found it hard at first, because he would keep turning it upside down before it reached his mouth, and a lot of the bread and milk ended up on his lap.

But Bob and Joan could see he was trying, and he was a quick learner. By the time he'd finished, he was quite good at it.

'Thank you,' he said.

'That's it. Well done,' said Bob. 'Now you come along with me and I'll show you how to wash the bowl and the spoon.' While they were doing that, Bob said, 'D'you know how old you are?'

'Yes,' said the boy. 'I know that all right. I'm three weeks old, I am.'

'Three weeks?'

'Yes. And I got two brothers and two sisters, the same age, three weeks.'

'Five of you?'

'Yes. I ain't seen 'em for a long time.'

'What's a long time?'

The boy thought, and said, 'Days.'

'And where's your mother and father?'

'Under the ground.'

Bob and Joan looked at each other, and they could each see what the other was feeling. The poor little boy was an orphan, and grief had turned his mind, and he'd wandered away from the orphanage he must have been living in.

As it happened, on the table beside him was Bob's newspaper, and suddenly the little boy seemed to see it for the first time.

'Here!' he said, delighted. 'That's Mary Jane!'

He was pointing to a picture of the Prince's new fiancée. The Prince had met her just the other day and they'd fallen in love at once, and the royal engagement was the main story of the week.

'She's going to marry the Prince,' said Bob, 'but she ain't called Mary Jane. That ain't the kind of name they give princesses.'

'I expect you must have got confused,' said Joan. 'And you can't go anywhere else tonight, that's for sure. We'll make you up a bed, my love, and you

can sleep here, and we'll find the proper place for you in the morning.'

'Ah,' he said. 'I didn't know that proper place, else I'd have gone there tonight.'

'Look, we'll have to call you something,' said Bob.

'Something,' the boy said, as if he was memorising it.

'A proper name,' said Joan. 'Like . . . Kaspar. Or . . .'

'Crispin,' said Bob. 'He's the saint of shoemakers, he is. That's a good name.'

'I bet there's a saint of washerwomen, too,' said Joan. 'Only no-one's ever heard of her.'

'Well, if it's a her, it'd be no good as a name for him, would it?'

'No, probably not,' she said. 'I don't suppose . . . I don't suppose we could call him Roger, could we?'

Roger was the name they would have called a son of their own, if they'd ever had one.

'It's only for tonight,' said Bob. 'Can't do any harm.'

'Little boy,' said Joan, touching his shoulder. 'We got to call you by a name, and if you ain't got one of your own, we'll call you Roger.'

'Yes,' said the little boy. 'Thank you.'

They made up a bed in the spare room, and Joan took his clothes down to wash. They gave Roger an

old nightshirt of Bob's to wear, and very small he looked in it, but he curled up tightly, looking for all the world as though he were trying to wrap a long tail around himself, and went to sleep at once.

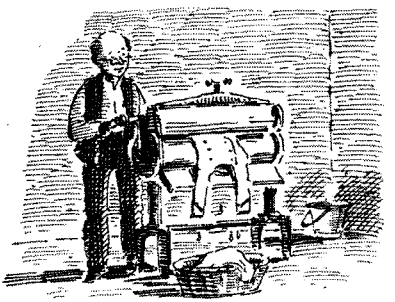
'What are we going to do with him?' said Bob, squeezing the page-boy uniform through the mangle. 'He might be a wild boy. He might have been abandoned as a baby and brung up by wolves. Or rats. I read about a boy like that only last week in the paper.'

'Stuff and nonsense!'

'You don't know,' he insisted. 'He as good as told us. "I was a rat," he said. You heard him!'

'Rats don't have page-boy uniforms,' she said. 'Nor they don't speak, either.'

'He could have learned to speak by listening through the walls. And he could have found the uniform on a washing line,' Bob said. 'You depend on it, that's what happened. He's a wild boy, and he was brung up by rats. You can read about that kind of thing every week in the paper.'



'You're a silly old man,' said Joan.



THE PRIVY

Next morning Joan found the little boy lying in a heap of torn sheets and a terrible tangle of blankets and feathers, fast asleep.

She was going to cry out, because she feared that something had come in at the window and attacked him in the night; but he was sleeping so peacefully among all the destruction that she couldn't bring herself to wake him, though she was in despair over the damage.

'Come and look,' she said to old Bob, and he stood open-mouthed in the doorway.

'It looks like a hen-run after a fox has been in,' he said.

There wasn't a sheet or a blanket that hadn't been torn into strips. The pillow was burst open, and feathers lay like snow over the whole bed. Even

Bob's old nightshirt lay in tattered strips around the thin little body on the mattress.

'Oh, Roger,' said Joan. 'What have you done?'

The boy must have learned his name, because he woke up as soon as she said it, and sat up cheerfully.

'I'm hungry again,' he said.

'Look at what you've done!' she said. 'What were you thinking of?'

He looked around proudly.

'Yes, it was hard, but I done it,' he said. 'There's a lot more that needs chewing and tearing and I'll do that for you later.'

'You shouldn't tear things up!' she said. 'I've got to sew them all together again! We don't live like that, tearing things to pieces! Dear oh dear!'

The more she looked, the more damage she saw. It was going to take hours to repair.

Bob said, 'Did you do that because you was a rat?'

'Yes!' said Roger.

'Ah, well, that explains it,' the old man said, but Joan was in no mood to listen.

'That's got nothing to do with it! Never mind what he *was*, it's what he is *now* that matters! You shouldn't tear things up like this!' she cried, and she took his thin little shoulders and shook him, not hard, but enough to startle him.

'You come down the kitchen with me,' said Bob,

'and I'll tell you a thing or two. But first let's have some more manners. You've upset Joan, so you have to say sorry.'

'Sorry,' said the boy. 'I understand now. Sorry.'

'Come along,' said Bob, and took him by the hand. He could see Roger fidgeting, and guessed what he wanted to do, and took him to the privy just in time. 'Whenever you want to do that, you come in here,' he said.

'Yes, I will,' said the boy. 'That's a good idea.'

'Now come and have your breakfast. Wrap them pieces of nightshirt around you, you can't walk around naked, it ain't decent.'

Roger sat and watched Bob cut two slices of bread and prop them on the range to toast.

'I'll cook you an egg,' the old man said. 'You like eggs?'

'Oh, yes,' said Roger, 'thank you. I like eggs a lot.'

Bob cracked it into the frying pan, and Roger's jaw dropped as he saw the white spitting and bubbling and the golden yolk glistening in the middle.

'Ooh, that's pretty!' he said. 'I never seen the inside of an egg!'

'I thought you'd ate 'em before.'

'I ate 'em in the dark,' Roger explained.

'What, when you was a rat?'

'Yes. Me and my brothers and sisters, we ate 'em in the dark, yes.'

'All right then,' said Bob peaceably, and slid the fried egg onto a plate, and buttered the toast.

Roger could barely hold himself back, but he remembered to say, 'Thank you,' before he put his face right down onto the plate and drew it back at once, gasping at the heat. His eyes brimming with tears, yellow yolk dripping off his mouth and nose, he turned to Bob in distress.



'Oh, I forgot you don't know how boys eat eggs,' the old man said. 'You probably thought you was a rat still, I expect.'

'Yes,' said Roger unsteadily, wiping at the mess with his fingers and licking them hard. 'I couldn't see the spoom, so I used me face.'

'It's a spoon, not a spoom. For eggs, you got to use a knife and fork. Here, do it like this, you copy me.'

Ignoring the tears and the egg on his face, Roger tried hard to do as Bob showed him. It was much harder to eat the egg with a fork than it had been to spoon up the bread and milk, but whenever he got

discouraged, Bob told him to take a bite of toast. Roger held it up in both hands, and chewed it swiftly with his front teeth.

'I like toast,' he said. 'And egg.'

'Good. Now listen. We got to find out where you come from, and if there's someone who ought to be looking after you. Because you can't look after yourself, you're too little. And you can't stay here, because . . . Because you don't belong to us, see?'

'I want to stay here. I don't want to go anywhere.'

'Well, we got to do what's right. There's clever folk in the City Hall, they know what's right. We'll go along there by and by.'

'Yes, that's right,' said Roger.

