

# THE WORLD'S BEST FAIRY TALES



A READER'S DIGEST ANTHOLOGY

THE  
WORLD'S  
BEST  
FAIRY  
TALES

Edited by  
BELLE BECKER SIDEMAN

Illustrations by  
ERITZ KREDEL

The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.  
Pleasantville, New York Montreal



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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 79-89496

ISBN 0-89577-076-8 (Volume One)

ISBN 0-89577-078-4 (Set)

Printed in Hong Kong

OSB/258



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## THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN

**A** VERY LONG time ago, the town of Hamelin in Germany was invaded by bands of rats, the likes of which had never been seen before nor ever will be again. They were great black creatures which ran boldly in broad daylight through the streets and swarmed all over the houses, so that people at last could not put hand or foot down anywhere without touching one.

When dressing in the morning they found rats in their breeches and petticoats, in their pockets and in their boots; and when they wanted a morsel to eat, the voracious horde had swept away everything from cellar to garret. The nighttime was even worse. As soon as the lights were out, these untiring nibblers set to work. And everywhere—in the ceilings, in the floors, in the cupboards, at the doors—there was a chase and a rummage, and so furious a noise of gimlets, pincers and saws that a deaf man could not rest for even one hour. Neither cats nor dogs, nor poison nor traps, nor prayers, nor candles burned to all the saints—nothing did any good. The more rats they killed the more came.



But one Friday there arrived in the town a man with a queer face, who played the bagpipes and sang this refrain:

Who lives shall see:  
This is he,  
The ratcatcher.

He was a tall, gawky fellow, dry and bronzed, with a crooked nose, a long rattail mustache, two great yellow piercing and mocking eyes under a large felt hat set off by a scarlet cock's feather. He was dressed in a green jacket with a leather belt and orange breeches, and on his feet were sandals fastened by thongs passed around his legs in the gypsy fashion. That is how he may be seen to this day, painted on a window of the cathedral of Hamelin.

He stopped in the great marketplace before the town hall, turned his back to the church and went on with his music, singing:

Who lives shall see:  
This is he,  
The ratcatcher.

The town council had just assembled to consider once more this plague of Egypt, from which no one could save the town. The stranger sent word to the councilors that if they would make it worth his while, he would rid them of all their rats before night fell.

"Then he is a sorcerer!" cried the citizens with one voice. "We must beware of him."

The chief town councilor, who was considered clever, reassured them. He said, "Sorcerer or no, if this bagpiper speaks the truth, it was he who sent us this horrible vermin he wants to rid us of today for money. Well, we must learn to catch the devil in his own snares. You leave it to me."

"Leave it to the town councilor," said the citizens one to another.

And the stranger was brought before them. "Before night," said he, "I shall have dispatched all the rats in Hamelin if you will but pay me a schilling a head."

"A schilling a head!" cried the citizens. "But that will come to millions of taler!"

The town councilor simply shrugged his shoulders and said to the stranger, "A bargain! The rats will be paid for at one schilling a head as you ask."

The bagpiper announced he would begin that very evening when the moon rose. He added that the inhabitants should at that hour leave the streets free and content themselves with looking out of their windows at the pleasant spectacle that was passing.

When the people of Hamelin heard of the bargain, they too exclaimed, "A schilling a head! But this will cost us a deal of money!"

"Leave it to the town councilor," said the town council with a malicious air. And the good people of

Hamelin repeated, "Leave it to the town councilor."

Toward evening the bagpiper reappeared in the marketplace. As at first, he turned his back to the church, and the moment the moon rose on the horizon, the bagpipes resounded: *Trarira, trari!*

It was first a slow, caressing sound, then more and more lively and urgent, and so sonorous and piercing that it penetrated the farthest alleys and retreats of the town. Soon—from the bottom of cellars, the top of garrets, from under all the furniture, from all the nooks and corners of the houses—out came the rats, searching for the door, flinging themselves into the street, and—trip, trip, trip—they began to run in file toward the front of the town hall, so squeezed together that they covered the pavement like the waves of a flooded torrent.

When the square was quite full, the bagpiper faced about and, still playing briskly, turned toward the river that runs at the foot of the walls of Hamelin.

Arriving there, he turned around; the rats were following. "Hop! Hop!" he cried, pointing with his finger to the middle of the stream where the water whirled and was drawn down as if through a funnel. And, hop, hop, without hesitating, the rats took the leap, swam straight to the funnel, plunged in head foremost and disappeared.

The plunging continued thus without ceasing till midnight. At last, dragging himself with difficulty,

came a big rat, white with age, who stopped on the bank. It was the king of the band.

"Are they all there, Friend Blanchet?" asked the bagpiper.

"They are all there," replied the white rat.

"And how many were they?"

"Nine hundred and ninety thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine."

"Well reckoned?"

"Well reckoned."

"Then go and join them, old sire, and *au revoir*."

And the old white rat sprang in his turn into the river, swam to the whirlpool and disappeared.

When the bagpiper had thus concluded his business, he went to bed at his inn. And for the first time in three months the people of Hamelin slept quietly through the night.

The next morning at nine o'clock, the bagpiper appeared at the town hall, where the town council awaited him. "All your rats took a jump into the river yesterday," said he to the councilors, "and I guarantee that not one of them comes back. They were nine hundred and ninety thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine, at a schilling a head. Reckon!"

"Let us reckon the heads first. One schilling a head is one head the schilling. Where are the heads?"

The piper did not expect this treacherous stroke. He paled with anger, and his eyes flashed fire. "The

heads!" cried he. "If you care about them, go and find them in the river."

"So," replied the chief councilor, "you refuse to honor the terms of your agreement? We ourselves could refuse you all payment. But you have been of use to us, and we will not let you go without a recompense." With this, he offered him fifty taler.

"Keep your recompense for yourself," replied the piper proudly. "If you do not pay me, I will be paid by your heirs." Thereupon he pulled his hat down over his eyes, went hastily out of the hall and left the town without speaking to a soul.

When the people of Hamelin heard how the affair had ended, they rubbed their hands and, with no more scruple than their town councilors, laughed about the bagpiper who, they said, had been caught in his own trap. But what made them laugh above all was his threat of getting himself paid by their heirs. Ha! They wished they could only have such creditors for the rest of their lives.

Next day, which was a Sunday, they went gaily to church, thinking that afterward they would at last be able to eat some good thing that the rats had not tasted before them. They never suspected the terrible surprise that awaited them on their return home: no children anywhere! They had all disappeared!

"Our children! Where are our poor children?" was the cry that was soon heard in all the streets.



Then through the east gate of the town came three little boys who cried and wept, and this is the story they told:

While the parents were at church, a wonderful music had sounded in the streets. Soon all the little boys and all the little girls who had been left at home, attracted by the magic sounds, had gone out to the great marketplace. There they found the piper playing his bagpipes. Then the stranger started to walk quickly, and they had followed—running, singing and dancing to the sound of the music, as far as the foot of the mountain which one sees on entering Hamelin. At their approach the mountain had opened a little, and the bagpiper had gone in with them, after which it had closed again.

Only the three little ones who told of the adventure had remained outside, as if by a miracle. One was lame and could not run fast enough; the second, who had left the house in haste, one foot shod, the other bare, had hurt himself against a big stone and could scarcely walk; the third had arrived on time, but while hurrying to go in had struck so violently against the wall of the mountain that he fell backward at the moment it closed upon his comrades.

Hearing this story, the parents redoubled their lamentations. They ran with pikes and mattocks to the mountain and searched till evening to find the opening through which their children had disappeared, without

success. At last, the night falling, they returned desolate to Hamelin.

But the most unhappy was the town councilor who had bargained with the piper, for he had lost three boys and two girls, and to crown all, the people of Hamelin overwhelmed him with reproaches, forgetting that the day before they had agreed with him.

What had become of these unfortunate children?

The parents always hoped they were not dead and that the piper, who certainly must have come out of the mountain, would have taken them with him to his own country. That is why for several years they sent in search of them to different countries, but no one ever found a trace of the poor little ones.

It was not till much later that anything was to be heard.

About a hundred and fifty years after the event, when there were no longer any of the fathers, mothers, brothers or sisters of that day left, there arrived one evening in Hamelin some merchants of Bremen returning from the East, who asked to speak with the citizens. They told how, in crossing Hungary, they had sojourned in a mountainous country called Transylvania where the inhabitants spoke only German, while all around them nothing was spoken but Hungarian. These people also declared that they came from Germany, but they did not know how they chanced to be in this strange country.



“Now,” said the merchants of Bremen, “these Germans cannot be other than the descendants of the lost children of Hamelin.”

The people of Hamelin did not doubt it; and since that day they have regarded it as certain that the Transylvanians of Hungary are their countryfolk, whose ancestors, as children, were taken from Hamelin by the bagpiper. There are more difficult things to believe than that.

CHARLES MARELLES, ANDREW LANG COLLECTION

## SNOW WHITE AND ROSE RED

**A** POOR WIDOW once lived in a little cottage, in front of which grew two rose trees, one bearing white roses and the other red. She had two little girls who were just like the two trees. One was called Snow White and the other Rose Red, and they were the sweetest and best children in the world.

Rose Red loved to run about the fields and meadows and to pick flowers and catch butterflies, but Snow White sat at home with her mother and helped her in