

## THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN (a tale from Germany)

Tell Me a Story by Amy Friedman and Meredith Johnson

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LONG AGO, in the medieval city of Hamelin on the Weser River, a strange event occurred. The town was prosperous, with abundant fisheries and brimming granaries. Thick walls protected the people from their enemies, and they enjoyed a big town square with a lovely carved fountain.

The people of Hamelin had just one problem. Huge black rats lived on their grain and fish and meat. The rats nested beneath eaves and in the walls and cellars of every house. As time passed, the rats became so numerous, even the cats of Hamelin could not control them. They grew immune to every poison and smart enough to avoid traps. There seemed no way to rid the city of the creatures who stole the people's food, gnawed at their houses and bit their children.

One fine day a jolly looking stranger appeared in the town square. The people gathered around him out of curiosity, for few strangers ever came to Hamelin. When he asked for bread and water, they gave him both.

As he drank his fill, one of the burghers broke through the crowd and approached the stranger. "Excuse me," the burgher said gruffly. "How do you plan to pay for these gifts?"

The stranger smiled and drew a slender reed from his sack. "I'll pay with a song," he said, putting the instrument to his lips. At the first few notes, all who were near stopped what they were doing, for the music was mesmerizing.

When the piper finished his song, the burgher asked, "and what else can you do?"

"My pipe will do whatever I ask," the piper answered.

The people moved close, for the piper was speaking of magic.

The piper had, all this while, been observing closely the goings-on in the city around him. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I can rid this place of all these rats if you like. For a price, of course."

"What price?" the burgher asked suspiciously.

"Thirty guilders."

The people gasped, but the burgher agreed to this bargain. "Now remember," the piper said to the burgher as they shook hands, "you must not break our bargain, for as I've told you already, my pipe can play many different kinds of tunes." With that he crossed the square and disappeared through the gate leading out of the city.

The next morning, music lured people from their beds. They flung open their shutters and watched as the piper walked through the narrow streets. They stared in wonder, for the rats were following him. They streamed out of cellars and attics, from windows and nests. Before long a river of rats was scuttling along the cobbled streets, following the piper's lead.

The piper led the rats to the river and waded in, playing all the while. Enchanted by the music, the rats paddled into the water and suddenly realized they couldn't swim. But they could not turn around, for the music led them forward, and soon they were scrabbling and pawing at the current and at each other as they fought to save their lives. They slapped at the water and shrieked as the people of Hamelin watched the creatures drown.

When there were no rats left, the piper waded to shore. He was completely dry. "My business is finished," he said. "And now if you will pay me, I shall be on my way."

The burgher frowned. "I think 10 guilders is enough," and that is what he handed the piper.

For a moment the piper was silent as he stared at the coins in his hand. At last he said, "We had a bargain, and I warned you. My pipe plays many tunes."

The burgher simply shook his head, and all the others looked away. The piper shrugged and quickly walked out of the city. Within a moment the people could see only the tip of his bright cap as he walked across the fields toward the mountain looming over the city.

The next day at dawn, the people again heard the piper's tune floating over the fields and through the gate. Wherever the music sounded, the adults froze like statues. The children, though, did not freeze. They awoke and rose from their beds and began to follow the sound of the music. Blindly and silently they marched until the streets

were crowded with children dressed in nightshirts and gowns. As the piper's song filled the air, the children followed him right through the town, out of the gate.

That was the last anyone ever saw of the piper and the children of Hamelin. That day 130 youngsters disappeared.

Two days later, two bruised and confused children were discovered outside the city gate. One of the children was blind, and it was he who told the story. The piper, he said, had led all the children to the top of Mount Poppen. There a huge gate had opened, and the piper led the children inside. The blind boy was slow, it seems, and as he reached the place, a wall of brambles closed on him. When he later woke, he found another child lying beside him, and he felt along the side of the mountain where once the gate had been. Nothing was there.

The people of Hamelin never forgot their tragedy. When they built a new town gate, they inscribed these words upon it:

"This gate was built 272 years after the sorcerer abducted 130 children from the city."

And they passed their tale on, reminding all their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the folly of their ancestors, and the sorrow that befell them when they disregarded the bargain struck with a being from a world beyond their walls.