

I

“And your name is?”

“I have no name. I am nobody. I am less than nobody. I am a ratcatcher.”

The man who spoke these words stood with his head held upright in the doorway of a house where the figure of a woman was gleaming in the twilight. He watched her with his dark inquisitive eyes. He was tall and thin and he appeared even thinner in his tight velvet coat and narrow trousers. His hands were small and gentle, like the hands of a lady. He carried no weapon by his side, not even a walking cane, though it seemed as if he came from far away, traveling on roads that weren't always secure. He did, however, hold on to a long, ornamental object that sparked curiosity in the woman with whom he was speaking. It was a unique fife that flaunted the skill of a foreign craftsman. She had never seen anything like it before.

“A ratcatcher,” laughed the woman in the doorway. “You've come to Hamelin just in time. There are no ratcatchers here, but we have plenty of rats. Explain to me, Ratcatcher, where do these rats come from? I've been told

that they weren't always here. However," she added with a smile, "it's also true that old folks often claim the world keeps getting worse."

The Ratcatcher shrugged.

"I don't know where they come from, but they are in each one of your homes. They continuously gnaw at things, first down in the cellars, in places where you can't see them. But then they grow more daring and climb to the surface. Let's say you plan a feast for a wedding, baptism or something of the sort, and then imagine that during that feast, these rats suddenly appear with their long earlobes and whiskers. You must admit such a view spoils the appetite."

"I agree," the woman laughed. "During Katherine's wedding a big rat suddenly appeared. The groom was pale as a ghost and Katherine fainted. Folks can't bear the sight of anything that would ruin their appetites. That's when they finally decide to call for a ratcatcher."

"Are you preparing a wedding or perhaps a baptism?" the Ratcatcher interrupted suddenly.

The woman in the doorway laughed out loud.

"It's quite obvious that you're a stranger around these parts. No, Ratcatcher, I am not married."

The Ratcatcher bowed.

"It doesn't matter," he said, "it doesn't matter at all... well anyway, people summon the Ratcatcher and he plays and plays his fife until he lures all vermin from their hideouts. They follow him as if they were in a trance, and

he leads them to a river: the Rhine, the Danube, the Havel, the Weser... and then the house is free of rats."

The Ratcatcher bowed once more. His voice trembled as if it meant to render an elegy of some sort.

The woman was silent, fidgeting with a twig of jasmine.

"And once the work is done, no one remembers the ratcatcher," he continued. "A ratcatcher, Stranger, is a man who doesn't stay; he leaves. Folks are glad to see him come but are even happier to see him go."

"Is that so?" she said, seemingly encouraging him – or perhaps not. Nevertheless, the Ratcatcher took it as encouragement. His pale cheeks colored, and maybe she would have noticed were it not for the nearing darkness.

"I can sense it, Stranger, he said, "People cannot love a ratcatcher; they can only fear him."

She laughed once again. "What makes the rats follow you so blindly, Ratcatcher?"

He pointed to his fife, which oddly seemed to have come to life. "It's a unique instrument," he said.

She gazed curiously upon the fife and then timidly touched the instrument.

"It's a fife," she said contemptuously, "a pretty fife, but nothing more."

"Rats have good hearing and my fife has a good sound."

The Ratcatcher's eyes ignited with an odd flame. The woman in the doorway stepped back slightly. The twig in her hand began to tremble.

“I have a special talent for purging rats,” the Ratcatcher continued, “I sometimes play very sad tunes – songs from all the places I’ve traveled. And I have seen many places: lands both sunlit and dark, mountains and plains. My fife sounds soft. The rats listen to it and follow. There is no ratcatcher like me anywhere. I will tell you something, beautiful Stranger who laughs like a bell. I have never blown my fife with a full burst of air. I have always softened my blowing. If I gave it all I had, rats would not be the only vermin following me.”

The Ratcatcher finished speaking what he wanted to say. The flame in his eyes died out and he intuitively lowered his arms along with his fife.

“I haven’t the courage,” he added after a moment. “Something cruel would happen.”

The young woman stood there silently and never took her eyes off the Ratcatcher or his fife. When he stopped speaking, she said rather quietly,

“I like you, Ratcatcher. Before twilight came, I saw silver streaks in your black hair. Before you spoke, I noticed wrinkles on your forehead. Nevertheless, I like what I see. Surely, many women have loved you.”

“Perhaps,” the Ratcatcher replied. “I don’t remember.” His words developed a strange, resonant accent that captivated the woman. Her tone grew serious. She leaned toward him so she could feel his hot breath.

“I like you, Ratcatcher,” she continued encouragingly. “But if I were you, I would blow into that fife with all the

breath I had.”

“Do you realize what could happen?” the Ratcatcher asked in a gloomy voice. “I don’t know myself. All I can tell you is that, time after time, anguish consumes me. I look at my life as upon something that has destroyed many and is meant to destroy even more. And then I laugh. It is nothing more than a pretty life. You said it yourself. I am nothing more than a ratcatcher who is destined to lead away all unwanted guests. A ratcatcher is like Ahasver<sup>1</sup>, who travels from town to town, from North to South, from East to West; and just like Ahasver, he can’t stand still. Have I overstayed my welcome here, Stranger? Should I leave?”

“No,” she said. And then she began to whisper. “You can call me Agnes.”

“Agnes,” he said, and as he spoke his voice turned soft and melodic. His lips gathered a peculiar sense of magic.

She looked at him intensely.

“Will you be leaving Hamelin soon?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It is not up to me. And...”

He then replied with a glance.

She laughed and it sounded fresh and pure – filled with youth and happiness. It resonated like the bells of resurrection.

“I think that you have your work cut out for you. There are many rats here.” Then she added in a more serious

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<sup>1</sup> *Translator’s note:* Ahasver is better known in medieval Central European mythology as the *Wandering Jew*.

tone, "You should stay, Ratcatcher."

He did not answer. Their eyes met. She felt uneasy yet gazed inquisitively into his fiery eyes. The jasmine twig trembled in her hand.

"I have a lover," she said.

The Ratcatcher took her by the hand.

"I don't want to see him. I don't want to hear anything about him. I know that there are many ugly things in this world. Why do I need to care about them if they don't cross my path? However, if I did meet him..."

The Ratcatcher's voice grew deep and then saddened. It sounded serious and threatening like a passing bell.

"No," she sighed, but it wasn't clear to him what that word meant. They both found themselves at the edge of a steep crevice where neither dared to take that extra step; where flight was the only alternative. He held her hand in his own and she allowed him to. He squeezed it. He squeezed her with a force and passion that made her gasp in pain. Nevertheless, she returned the gesture and the pain he felt was numbing.

"Agnes," he said and it sounded like a question as well as a plea. She looked at him and smiled.

"Yes," she replied, and it was clear to him what that word meant. It was utterly naked, without timidity or reservation. And the woman in the doorway handed the Ratcatcher her twig of jasmine.

## II

When the Ratcatcher awoke, he found himself in a small refuge in the good Hanseatic<sup>2</sup> town of Hamelin, a quiet and abandoned sanctuary separated from the town's presence. Heavy wagons loaded with merchandise never rumbled here. No one would hear the bustle of markets or the sound of riders dressed in lavish armor traveling through. Not even religious processions would pass by. Only the ringing of bells from the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Hamelin made its way to this place. Their voice was deep and pensive, but it was rather forgettable to those who heard it so often. At least Agnes, when she opened her window, would hear different voices.

There was a garden in bloom beneath her window, where birds would sing to her and everything buzzed with life and laughter as she greeted each day. The garden carried so many fragrances — each was intoxicating. And Agnes thought she was a flower among flowers and a fragrance among fragrances.

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<sup>2</sup> *Translator's note:* *Hanseatic* means part of the Hanseatic League, a commercial and defensive confederation of merchant guilds and their market towns that dominated trade throughout Northern Europe. The town of Hamelin was a member of this league.

Agnes lived in a house with a hollow tile roof. It was an old house covered in the green of chestnut trees, but it had the ability to brighten when unveiled in the sunlight.

Then there was beautiful Agnes's mother — a woman wilted more by the sadness of her stories than by the years that had passed. They were stories that she remembered with a blend of nostalgia and horror. She would tremble feverishly as she hovered like a ghost around the house. The sun and the light would scare her and she would run from them like a nocturnal bird.

Agnes, on the other hand, did not seem to be afraid of anything. She would gaze upon the future armed with a credulous smile.

And so the days went by, and the Ratcatcher stayed in Hamelin chasing rats away.

It was quite the event for Hamelin. Children and old folks alike would accompany him on his route. Children and old folks alike would become baffled by the way the rats would blindly follow the Ratcatcher to their demise. They were fascinated by his fife, which to these good and honorable citizens sounded no louder than a distant buzzing of insects.

The river waves embraced the rats and consumed them. Then they carried them to the sea — the faraway sea — never again to spoil the fine appetites of the respectable citizens of this Hanseatic town.

The Ratcatcher continued to lure the rats away, but he also had another reason to extend his stay in Hamelin...

### III

Down where the Wesser and Havel rivers merged there lived a fisherman by the name of Sepp Jorgen. He had a small and destitute house and he lived a poor and wretched life.

People of all the guilds in Hamelin would ridicule the poor lad, for he had difficulty understanding things. He was kind, but rather dense. They said that he would laugh or cry, but it would always occur a day later, and they were right.

When it came to fishing, he didn't have to think. He'd toss his nets and then wait. Waiting was the one thing Sepp Jörgen could do like no other. He would wait patiently, resigned to his fate, but he would rarely see anything happen as a result. They say that those who wait like this are destined to such an existence.

Sepp Jörgen, however, never lost his patience. He knew that day must look like day and night must look like night; that some folks were born into happiness and others into despair. He knew that there were noblemen at the Town Hall dressed in lavish furs and beautiful chains who gave

orders. There were also the poor living in dark and damp lairs who had to follow these orders. He understood this because he saw it his entire life.

He knew that he had to avoid the imperial road when he saw drunken *landsknechts*<sup>3</sup> coming. He knew these things though he was a slow lad.

Eventually, he realized that everyone was laughing at him. His fellow fishermen, the girls in Hamelin. It would hurt him, and in due time it seemed hard for Jörgen to determine what hurt him more. His fists were often clenched, but his heart was, too. Unfortunately, because of his shortcomings, Sepp Jörgen would always realize these feelings a day later. And so men would calmly walk away after insulting him and women who had the potential to love him would fade into the distance. It was his destiny, and no one escapes destiny.

And yet, Sepp Jörgen was a stout lad with strong muscles and firm fists. He was handsome with a good heart and kind but rather unruly eyes.

The only thing he owned was a thrush in a cage, which he cared for meticulously. He knew how to do this because the task was simple and plain. Day after day it was the same, and day after day it was beautiful – at least it seemed that way to Jörgen. The thrush did not laugh at him or hurt him, and if the Fisherman felt sad and lonely, the thrush was capable of easing his rather foolish

<sup>3</sup> *Translator's note:* *Landsknechts* were mercenary soldiers active in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. They were mostly foot soldiers and pike-men.

heart. Jörgen would listen to its clear and soothing song. He would forget about his terrible catch, his poverty and the insults of all the beautiful girls living in Hamelin. He would smile, lulled by song, and everything would smile upon his wretched life. In this world women would come and kiss him.

The bird would sing and Sepp Jörgen would live expecting nothing more out of life.

## IV

The lover's name was Kristian. They called him Tall Kristian. He had blond hair, blue eyes and everything a citizen of Hamelin could wish for — honorable parents, a good name, respect for both the Town Hall and the Church. He was employed in his uncle's store located in the archway of Hamelin's town square. It was a draper's shop that was well-known far and near, and because Kristian's uncle was childless, his nephew cherished the thought that he would become the sole heir of this enterprise. The only rub was that Uncle Andreas, a somewhat older man, never stopped pursuing affairs that only a merchant such as him could afford — affairs that scandalized the respectable name of the town. Tall Kristian did what he could to lure all temptation from his uncle's path. He acquired the services of Miss Gertrude, a woman older and no longer attractive, to be his uncle's housekeeper. Uncle Andreas had little time to pursue his lovers, so Kristian teetered between hope and despair. Besides that, he loved Agnes.

He would tell her about his worries and sleepless nights when the thought of a temptress troubled him like

a nightmare. He would tell her about his uncle's affairs with a disgust that only a respectable man and threatened heir could render.

Agnes would listen. Her only worry was to keep the Ratcatcher a secret from Kristian and to make sure that one would never be seen by the other.

Kristian would sometimes talk about the Ratcatcher, his accomplishments, and his trade, which the Draper's nephew considered to be useful but not highly regarded. Agnes would listen and agree — at least that was how Kristian interpreted her silence.

The Ratcatcher remained in Hamelin and Tall Kristian continued to teeter between hope and despair.

## V

Above the beautiful Hanseatic town of Hamelin stood Koppel Mountain, a source of pride that was equal only to the pride the townspeople had for Hamelin itself. On Sundays the townspeople would dress festively, leave the gates of Hamelin and set off to ascend Koppel Mountain. The climb was steep and sweat dripped down their foreheads, but the view from the top of the city and its surroundings was well worth the effort.

During the climb they had to pass through a dark pine forest, and though the citizens of Hamelin never realized it, the forest was rather sad. But even the saddest forest could not retain its woe when it was filled with the joyous and thoughtful conversations of Hamelin's merchants and their respectable wives, as well as the local girls and boys.

Above this wooded area, which to most citizens represented the final stage of their climb, Koppel Mountain offered other possibilities. If you suddenly left the forest, you would pass by several scattered boulders that made their way to this place centuries ago. Everything there was large and plain. You would then have a seat and take in

the view of the town, warm yourself in the sun and enjoy the Sunday tranquility because if you journeyed farther, you'd come to the edge of a giant abyss. The open abyss was cold and deep, and its bottom seemed endless. If you threw a stone, it would fall for a very long time. Koppel's top had its secrets. It was not simply an abyss but also a road — at least several brave souls claimed this after venturing all the way to Koppel's crest to explore the mysteries of its peak.

No one knew for certain, but folks would say this road led deep beneath the earth, far beyond the mountains and rivers to the land of the Seven Castles. They would claim this in spite of the fact that they never remembered who told them this story in the first place. One thing was certain: No one had ever completed this courageous journey and no one had ever reached the land of the Seven Castles from the top of Koppel Mountain.

One day the Ratcatcher stood above this abyss. He journeyed through the pine forest and the bare mountaintop where local snakes were sunning themselves. The Ratcatcher felt a craving to continue this journey. He stood at the edge, venturing farther than any of those brave souls born in Hamelin ever dared. He stood at that edge and it seemed as if he was speaking to the abyss — that mistress to all *felones-de-se*<sup>4</sup>.

It was clear that the abyss was tempting the Ratcatcher to go beyond its edge. He stood above it, pensive and alone.

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<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: *felones-de-se* are those who commit suicide.

The townspeople of Hamelin would have not appreciated the look he had in his eyes – a look that was deep and bottomless, and at that moment there was not just one abyss at the peak of Koppel Mountain, but rather two.

## VI

One day Sepp Jörgen lay in a meadow near his cottage. His head leaned on a pile of hay that smelled good, and Jörgen soon fell into a deep and unconscious sleep. Meanwhile two girls from Hamelin happened to stray onto Jörgen's meadow. It was Lora, Woodcarver Wolfram's daughter, and Kätchen, the daughter of Grill, the baker. They both had blond hair and curious eyes and they were intoxicated by youth. They were laughing because they were beautiful and they were beautiful because they were laughing. The sleeping fisherman ignited a curiosity within them. Tiptoeing, they closed in and began to study his face. The sleeping lad did not hear their footsteps. His torso was rising and dropping in a steady rhythm. His shirt was partially undone, and the girls could see his hairy and rather large, angular chest.

Lora Wolfram sat down next to the sleeping man. She leaned over him with her supple body as she held her breath to avoid waking him. But such measures were unnecessary. Sepp Jörgen never woke up. Kätchen also mustered the confidence to lightly touch the lad's curly

hair with her soft hand. He quivered slightly, as if he were touched by something cold and ugly, but Kätchen's hands were neither cold nor ugly. On the contrary, she was known by everyone in Hamelin for her beautiful hands.

But Sepp Jörgen did not awaken in spite of this quivering. The girls' eyes ignited with a peculiar flame. This man lying there indifferently and in such close proximity sparked an interest while he was sleeping – an interest that would have never occurred if he were awake. It seemed that everything trivial, ridiculous and petty linked to this lad's name, was slipping away. All that remained was the man resting on a pile of hay.

"If only it weren't Jörgen," Kätchen noted and shrugged her shoulders.

The woodcarver's daughter Lora Wolfram repeated, "If only it weren't Jörgen."

They lingered over the sleeping fisherman for a while as desire – and perhaps even gentleness – incited uncertain dreams of lust and love. A wave of intoxication overpowered their young bodies. Something was forcing them into the arms of the strong and muscular man.

The hay with a blend of scythed wild flowers smelled good.

"If only it weren't Jörgen," Kätchen repeated with a touch of regret, "it would be possible to love him. He is not ugly and surely only a few could match his strength. Folks say that no one should mess with Jörgen."

"A day later," Lora added. "He does everything a day

later. If he ever gets married, he is bound to realize the next day that he has a wife. The poor thing will have a sad wedding night.”

Lora’s words, followed by suppressed laughter, finally woke the sleeping fisherman. At first, he looked around uneasily. He was comprehending neither time nor space. He stared at the girls’ flustered faces with a strange and baffled look in his eyes. The Hamelin girls could no longer hold back their unruly nature. They burst into excessive laughter that was heard from far away — a laughter that was healthy, tangible, and overindulgent. It was the laughter of a woman who would like to sin.

The Fisherman stared baffled and mute at the laughing girls. Then slowly he began to get up, gazing at Kätchen and Lora. But enough was enough. The girls realized that it would be unwise to be caught in the presence of Sepp Jörgen, especially because his foolishness began to resurface. They disappeared before Jörgen could come to fully. Nevertheless, one could hear their untamed laughter from far away. Sepp Jörgen still did not understand what was happening. It was his destiny not to understand.

## VII

The night was damp and moonlit. The square in Hamelin was empty. A watchman passed by a noticeable old fountain with statues of Neptune and Triton, another source of pride for the townspeople of Hamelin. The watchman disappeared somewhere in the archway, and the evening grew quiet.

It was only by Woodcarver Wolfram's doorway – and honorable Master Baker Grill had his shop there as well – that something resembling a man was cowering in the dark. It looked somewhat devastated and inhuman. It had eyes, such eager eyes, focused only in one particular direction.

When the watchman sounded the midnight hour in the distance, Andreas, the draper, passed through the archway heading for a tryst with one of the women at the Holy Spirit Tavern. His footsteps disturbed the silence of the night, but the devastated creature paid no attention to him.

Then the watchman passed by again and a sudden interest hastened his steps. But before he approached

this distraught being, the watchman's expectation and awareness ebbed. He shrugged his shoulders and went about his business. There was no prospect of an earning here. None. For it was only Sepp Jörgen.

Sepp did not speak. He gazed upon the woodcarver's door as if he could open it with his sight. The door, however, was well locked. The woodcarver, Wolfram, and baker, Grill, were most likely asleep. Perhaps Kätchen and Lora were as well. Their windows were closed and they had no plans to open them. A juvenile attempt to wake the two girls would never have crossed Sepp Jörgen's mind anyway. Surely, there were enough tiny pebbles well-suited to draw attention, but it was pointless to wake a woman who had no wish to be roused. Even the dim Sepp Jörgen understood this.

Sepp Jörgen was not moving, but this did not mean that he was there waiting idly. Suddenly, the Ratcatcher's tall and misshapen shadow appeared from behind the Fisherman.

The Ratcatcher was wandering the streets. He was having one of his restless nights. He leaned over Sepp Jörgen, who was mumbling quiet yet passionate words:

"Go ahead and laugh. Yes, laugh at Sepp Jörgen. I know you! You're Lora, Woodcarver Wolfram's daughter. You are Kätchen, the daughter of Baker Grill. You're both beautiful and you're more beautiful when you laugh. It's useless to tell you this because you know it very well. Yet, there is one thing you don't know and Sepp Jörgen will

tell you. You laugh, but it is not wise to laugh at a man, even if he is only Sepp Jörgen. It's true that I am slow, that I am telling you now what I should have told you yesterday. You disappeared before I could express my pain. You don't listen to me when I speak. I missed my opportunity as I always do. Many people have laughed at me because of this, but no laughter is more crushing than that of a woman. Oh, the way you laughed at me! The blood in my veins boiled and my fists were clenched hard! I might be just a fisherman, but I have hands that could easily strangle a beautiful neck – a pale and beautiful neck – like yours I imagine.

“Why did you come to my meadow? I didn't call for you and I wasn't even looking or waiting for you.

“You came and you leaned over my face. I was dreaming. I had beautiful rosy dreams – the kind I get when my thrush is singing. But I have to tell you that I have no thrush now. I strangled the creature. It was the only thing I've ever owned and it will never sing again. It will never comfort me. My cottage will be silent and lifeless. I tested the strength of my hands. It was so satisfying to strangle something.

“I awoke from my dream. Oh, what a sharp laughter you have! As if a thousand devils were laughing, and not just two women! It is not wise to laugh at a man, even if he is only Jörgen. Now it's nighttime and you are asleep, but what if morning comes and Jörgen never leaves this place? Who is to say that this cursed laughter will stop haunting

my ears? If it doesn't, woe to you Lora and Kätchen! My thrush is dead. Everything that I have ever owned is dead. All I hear is laughter – sharp hellish laughter!”

The Ratcatcher gently touched the Fisherman's shoulder.

“Stand up, Jörgen.”

The Fisherman gazed at him with a dull and confused look in his eyes. What on earth did this ratcatcher want with him?

“Stand up Jörgen,” the Ratcatcher continued. “I have traveled many lands and visited many towns. That is why I tell you to stand up. It is not good to be on your knees.”

The Fisherman continued to gaze at him with a dull and confused look. The expression on his face did not change.

“Your Kätchen and your Lora will not hear you. They are sleeping. If they did hear you, your chances would be worse, Sepp Jörgen. A man who is on his knees is not a man.”

But Sepp Jörgen did not listen. He gazed somewhere – into a window, or perhaps into emptiness.

“If you'd like, Jörgen, I will tell you the honest truth. There is only a certain measure of love between two people. It is limited and invariable. Never love excessively if you want to be loved back. If you do, you alone will exhaust all the affection meant for two. An overload of what you give kills the hope for what you should receive. This is advice from the Ratcatcher, who has seen many things. Be

the man you want, just don't allow a woman to have you when it is *you* who should have her. Be who you want, but don't be cruel about it. That is unnecessarily harsh, Fisherman. But if you are kind by nature, try to hide it. Stand up Jörgen."

But Jörgen did not move.

The tower on the Holy Trinity Cathedral struck the hour.

The Ratcatcher shook his head indifferently. He pitied the devastated face kneeling at the deaf door of Woodcarver Wolfram, but he could not help.

"Farewell, Jörgen. You are a lost cause," he said after a little while. "You will never be happy. Does it matter after all? Happiness is not the pinnacle of life. Perhaps you are destined for something better if it doesn't involve happiness."

And the Ratcatcher began to leave.

It didn't seem that the Fisherman noticed his departure. Sepp Jörgen understood things too late. He kept mumbling something sad and monotonous into the silence of the night. He babbled words of love and hate, promises and threats. But they echoed through the darkness to no avail.

The Ratcatcher, in the meantime, headed for a quiet little street, to the house where Agnes lived. He tapped on her window. The window opened and soon after it was followed by the door.