

# **The Fir-Tree Fairy**

## **Book:**

Favorite Fairy Tales

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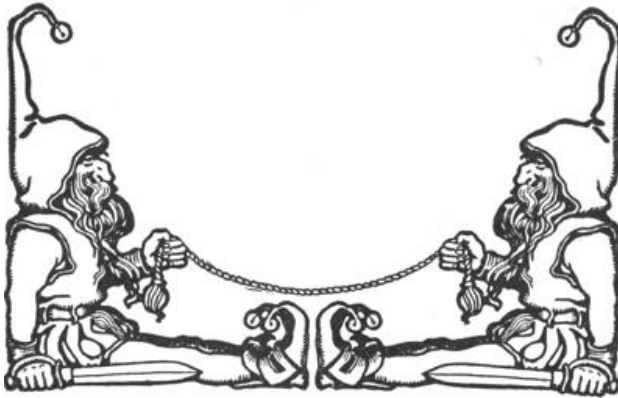
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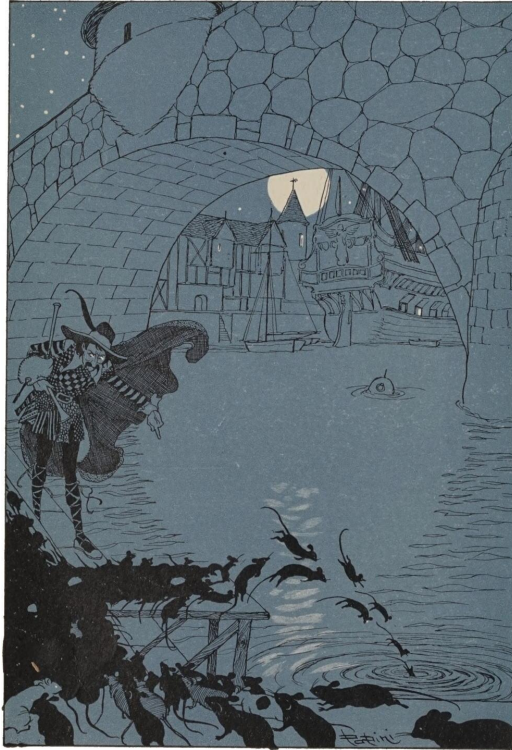
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YOU SAW

these little men  
on the cover guarding the  
road that leads to Fairy Land.  
Do you believe in Fairy Land?  
If so, they will let you pass. If  
not, they will make you  
turn back the way you  
came and will not let  
you into



## **THE FIR-TREE FAIRY BOOK**



*THE PIED PIPER ORDERS THE RATS INTO THE WATER*

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

IN the volumes that make up this series of fairy books are to be found the favorite wonder tales of many nations in a version especially suited for the home fireside. The interest, the charm and all the sweetness of the stories have been retained, but savagery, distressing details and excessive pathos have been dropped, and the books can be read aloud or placed in the hands of children with entire confidence.

The reasons for such changes as I have made in the stories are perhaps self-evident. Surely, most parents and teachers will agree that our little people are better off without some of the sentiments of the barbaric past when the tales originated. We can well spare most of the spectacles of falsehood, gluttony, drunkenness, torture and gore that are found in the usual tellings, and we can get along without the cruel fathers and wicked stepmothers. Civilization and culture have advanced vastly since the time when the stories started. Our primal instincts are more controlled, and law, education and ethics mean vastly more. The necessity therefore seems clear for softening or changing the crude ideals and doubtful morals and coarseness that have so often survived in the old stories.

The tales are drawn from many sources, and usually are the result of a comparison of several versions, and a combination of the best features of these versions into a simple straightforward whole such as children will read with understanding and pleasure.

The plan I have indicated was begun with “The Oak-Tree Fairy Book,” the initial volume of this tree named series, and has been consistently pursued in all the later volumes.

CLIFTON JOHNSON.

HADLEY, MASS.

***THE  
FIR-TREE FAIRY BOOK***



## THE PIED PIPER

THERE is a sleepy little town by the seashore, which for a time, long ago, was decidedly noisy. But the noise was not so much due to the number of people in the place, or the traffic on the streets, as it was to the fact that the town had been invaded by a horde of rats. Such an invasion had never been seen before nor ever will be seen again. The place was scarcely worth living in, so infested was it with these rats. The people found them in their breeches or petticoats when they put on their clothes in the morning, and it was nothing unusual to discover a rat's nest in one's shoes or pockets, or in one's Sunday hat or bonnet.

The rats were great black creatures that ran boldly through the streets in broad daylight, and swarmed all over the houses. There was not a barn, or a cornrick, or a storeroom, or a cupboard, but they gnawed their way into it.

They fought the dogs and killed the cats  
And bit the babies in their cradles,  
And ate the cheeses out of the vats  
And licked the soup from the cook's own ladle.

Even the barrels of beer were not safe from them. They would gnaw a hole in the barrel head, and into this hole some master rat would thrust his tail, and when he withdrew it dripping with beer all his friends and relatives would crowd around and each would have a suck at the tail.

They were bad enough in the daytime, but they were still worse at night. Then they were busy everywhere—in the walls and ceilings, and also in the rooms from cellar to garret. There was such a chase and a rummage, and such a squeaking and squealing, and such a noise as of gimlets, pincers and saws that a deaf man could not have rested for one hour together. The people could hardly hear themselves think, and many a mother felt obliged to sit up and keep watch over her children lest some big ugly rat should run across their faces.

Cats and dogs, poison and traps were of no avail. Nor were prayers any more effective. Of course many of the rats were killed, yet others constantly came to take the place of the dead ones. The mayor and the town council were at their wits' end. They were sitting one day in the town hall racking their brains, when a queer-looking stranger arrived in the place. As he tramped up the chief street he played the bagpipes, pausing in his playing now and then to sing this refrain:

“Who lives shall see  
This is he,  
The ratcatcher.”

He was a tall, gawky fellow with swarthy skin, a crooked nose, a long moustache, and piercing eyes. His broad-brimmed felt hat had a scarlet cock's feather stuck into its band, and there was not a color of the rainbow that could not be found in his jacket and breeches. A leather belt girded his waist, and on his feet were sandals fastened by thongs passed round his legs. He stopped in the great market-place before the town hall and went on with his piping and singing. The town beadle heard the purport of the song, and asked the stranger if he could rid the town of the rats with which it was overrun.

“Yes,” was the reply, “if you will make it worth my while.”

Then the beadle hurried off to report the stranger’s words to the council. As he approached their place of meeting the mayor was saying: “What to do, I know not. My poor head aches, I’ve scratched it so, and all in vain.”

Just as he said this, what should hap  
At the chamber door, but a gentle tap?



“Bless us!” cried the mayor, “what’s that?  
Anything like the sound of a rat  
Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!”

Then he said in a louder voice, “Come in,” and the beadle entered.

“Please, your honor,” said the beadle, “a very queer fellow has come to town who says he is a ratcatcher, and that he can clear the place of rats if we make it worth his while.”

“Then he is a sorcerer,” said the councilors with one voice. “We must beware of him.”

The mayor, who was considered clever, reassured them. “Sorcerer or not,” said he, “if this bagpiper speaks the truth, I doubt not it was he who sent us this horrible vermin in order to get money from us for inducing them to go away. Well, we must catch the evil-minded in their own snares. You leave it to me.”

“Leave it to the mayor,” said the councilors one to the other.

“Show him in,” said the mayor, and the beadle soon brought the ratcatcher before them.

“I am called the Pied Piper,” he said, “and ratcatching is my trade. What would you pay me to rid you of every rat in the town?”

Much as they disliked the rats they disliked parting with their money still more, and they fain would have higgled and haggled. But the Piper was not a man to stand nonsense, and the upshot of the matter was that they agreed to pay him at the rate of a penny a head as soon as there was not a rat left to squeak or scurry in the place.

The bagpiper announced that he would operate that very evening when the moon rose, and he requested that the inhabitants should leave the streets free, and content themselves with looking out of their windows while he was at his task.

When the townspeople heard of the bargain they exclaimed: "A penny a head! This will cost us a great deal of money!"

"Leave it to the mayor," said the town councilors with a sly shrug of the shoulders.

Toward nine o'clock the Piper reappeared in the market-place, and as soon as the moon showed above the roofs he put his bagpipes to his lips and began a shrill, keen tune that penetrated to the remotest nooks and alleys of the town. Then a strange sight was seen. From every hole the rats came tumbling, and ran to the market-place, until it was so full of them that the pavement was hidden from sight. At length the piper faced about, and, still playing briskly, went down a street that led toward the harbor. At his heels followed the rats with eager feet and upturned noses. Every fifty yards he stopped and gave an extra flourish of the pipes while he waited for the toddling little rats and the less vigorous ones to catch up with those that were stronger. Meanwhile the townsfolk looked on from their windows, and many a blessing they called down on his head.

When he reached the harbor and had marched to the outer end of a wharf, he turned about and looked at the multitude of rats. "Hop, hop!" he cried, pointing with his finger toward the water.

Not far from the end of the wharf a big whirlpool had formed, and the rats, obedient to the Piper's orders, began to leap from the wharf, and swim straight to the center of the whirlpool, where they

disappeared. This continued till midnight, when only one rat was left—a big rat, white with age, who dragged himself along with difficulty. It was the king of the band.

“Are they all there, friend Whitey?” asked the Piper.

“They are all there,” replied Whitey.

“How many?” the Piper questioned.

“Nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine,” was the answer.

“Then go and join them, old sire,” said the Piper. “Good-by.”

So the old rat jumped into the water, swam to the whirlpool, and down he went out of sight.

The Piper walked back into the town and went to bed at an inn; and for the first time in three months the people slept quietly through the night. There was no noise to disturb them, and they slept the more serenely because now there was a prospect they would have a chance to enjoy food that the rats had not tasted before them. In the morning, so rejoiced were they over their delivery from the plague of vermin that they threw up their caps and hurrahed, and they rang the church bells till they rocked the steeples. But at nine o'clock, when the Piper went to the town hall to get his pay, the mayor and the council and the townsfolk generally began to hum and ha, and to shake their heads, for where was all that money to come from? Besides, it had been a very easy job that the Piper had done and had only taken him a little while.

“Sirs,” said the Piper, “all your rats took a jump into the harbor last night, and I guarantee that not one of them will come back. There

were one million, and you can reckon how much is due me at a penny a head.”

“My good man,” said the mayor, “you must know that we are poor folk; surely you will not ask us to pay such a sum.”

“I only want you to do as you agreed to do,” responded the Piper.

“Ah,” said the mayor, “then let us reckon the heads. Have the kindness to bring them here that we may count them.”

The ratcatcher did not expect this treacherous stroke. He paled with anger, and his eyes flashed fire. “The heads!” he cried, “if you care about them, go and find them in the harbor.”

“So you refuse to hold to the terms of your bargain,” said the mayor. “We have good reason to refuse you all payment, but you have been of use to us, and we will be glad to recompense you to the extent of twenty pounds.”

“Keep your recompense to yourself,” retorted the ratcatcher proudly. “It would be better for you if you paid me quickly all that is my due. For I can pipe many kinds of tunes, as folk sometimes find to their cost. If you do not pay me I will be paid by your heirs.”

“Would you threaten us, you strolling vagabond?” shrieked the mayor. “Begone and do your worst now that the rats are drowned.”

“Very well,” said the Piper, and he pulled his hat down over his eyes, turned short on his heel, and left the hall.

The townspeople were much pleased over this outcome. They rubbed their hands gleefully, and laughed over the ratcatcher, who

they said was caught in his own trap. Above all they laughed at his threat of getting himself paid by their heirs. "Ha, ha!"

But when the Piper reached the market-place, he again put his pipes to his lips. This time there came forth no shrill notes, but a tune that was joyous and resonant, full of happy laughter and merry play. At this call the children all ran forth to the Piper from schoolroom and playroom and nursery. Every little boy and girl in town hurried to the market-place, attracted by the magic music. Then the stranger began to walk up a street that led out of the town, and they followed him, dancing, laughing, and singing.

Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,  
Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering.

On they went out of the town gate and into a forest that was near by, a forest full of old oaks and wide-spreading beeches. In among the trees went the Piper in his many-colored garments, and the laughter of the children gradually faded away as they went deeper and deeper into the cool green wood.

Hour after hour passed, and the children did not return. Then their parents went in search of them, but at nightfall came back desolate to the town. Nor was searching in future days any better rewarded. The mayor sent east, west, north, and south, to offer the Piper, if he could be found,

Silver and gold to his heart's content,  
If he'd only return the way he went,  
And bring the children behind him.

But never were the hearts of the townspeople gladdened by the sight of the Piper and his following of singing, dancing children



issuing from the ancient oaks of the forest. What became of the children is a mystery even to this day.

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