



The Rat Racket
Keller, David Henry

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About Keller:

David H. Keller (December 23, 1880 – July 13, 1966), David Henry Keller (most often published as David H. Keller, MD, but also known by the pseudonyms Monk Smith, Matthew Smith, Amy Worth, Henry Cecil, Cecilia Henry, and Jacobus Hubelaire), was a writer for pulp magazines in the mid-twentieth century who wrote science fiction, fantasy and horror. He was the first psychiatrist to write for the genre.

Keller was born in Philadelphia and graduated from the School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania in 1903. He served as neuropsychiatrist in U.S. Army Medical Corps during World Wars I and II, and was the Assistant Superintendent of the Louisiana State Mental Hospital at Pineville until Huey Long's reforms removed him from his position in 1928.

That same year, Keller would travel to New York City to meet with Hugo Gernsback, publisher of *Amazing Stories*, who had bought his first professionally published science fiction story, "The Revolt of the Pedestrians". Gernsback was impressed by Keller's quality of writing, unique insight, and ability to address sophisticated themes beyond the commonplace technological predictions or lurid alien encounters typically found in early pulp stories. He encouraged Keller's writing and would later call these distinctive short stories "keller yarns".

In 1929, Gernsback founded the magazine *Science Wonder Stories* and not only published Keller's work in the first issue, but listed him as an Associate Science Editor. It was this issue of *Science Wonder Stories* that introduced the word "science fiction" to the world. This began an intense writing period for Keller, but he was unable to support his family solely on a writer's income and set up a small private psychiatric practice out of his home in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.

While a number of Keller's works are considered dated and utilize plot lines or ideas that have since been dismissed as too simplistic or clichéd, other stories contain the detailed ramifications of future technology and address taboo issues of that era (such as bisexuality) that a reader might expect in a modern science fiction story. The level of complexity found in Keller's writing rises above many other pulp stories of the same period and holds the promise of "science fiction literature" that would be fulfilled during the Golden Age of Science Fiction.

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Richard Moyer, senior partner of the firm of Moyer & Perkins, read that letter over twice before he called in the man who had helped him make the importing of high grade groceries from England a most profitable business for over twenty years.

He simply handed the letter over to Paul Perkins without a word of explanation. The latter read it through and handed it back in equal silence, but the hand that held the letter trembled.

"Just another racket," exclaimed Moyer, finally.

"Looks like it. I suppose we were foolish to start in paying for protection. First our trucks were threatened; then the new building; after that our best customers were bombed, and we had to pay to protect them. Your son was kidnapped—and the police! They even went so far as to advise that we keep on paying—and now this letter! We might as well close out the business. All our profits go toward supporting a gang of criminals who have muscled into every type of American industry."

"On the face of it the letter looks innocent enough," sighed Perkins, as he picked it up and gave it another reading. "Simply says that the rat menace is increasing, cites several business houses where the rodents have done a great deal of damage, and offers to give our warehouses complete protection for five thousand a week. You could show that letter to a hundred police officials and they would laugh at your fears. But I am not laughing. Because that letter was written on the same damaged typewriter that the other letters were written on and those gangsters have not failed to make any of their threats good."

"Suppose we pretend that they are honest, and answer their letter and send them a check for the first week's protection?"

"They will laugh at you and send back the check."

"They may, at that. Then we will give them the cash. In either case, it will give us time to think. I feel that they are only experimenting with us. They are after larger game than five thousand a week. We shall see and hear more of this rat business in a while. Write to them and tell them that we will pay the cash, and put the entire matter in the hands of the Chamber of Commerce. If it does not act soon, the entire city will be in the hands of the gangsters."

The complaint of Moyer & Perkins was only one of a dozen similar ones which reached the Chamber of Commerce that day. In a secluded room of the Manufacturers' Club a dozen wealthy men met day after day, hearing and weighing evidence against a hundred forms of

racketeering which was rapidly becoming a terrible and powerful enemy to the varied industries of the Metropolis. Practically every business had been threatened and more than one captain of industry blustered openly, but paid his weekly tribute silently in order to protect his business, family, and home.

Up to this time the usual weapon had been the strong arm man and the bomb. While these were bad enough, they were at least understood. When it came to rats, it was different. Of course, everybody knew something about rats—that they were supposed to be numerous around the river fronts and warehouses—but on the other hand, rats were seldom seen in daylight, and there were many New Yorkers who never saw one.

Not one of the dozen men had been raised on a farm and none had served in the trenches during the World War. They did not understand rats, so, they hesitated, and finally simply advised the merchants who had received the rat letters to use their own judgement. As a result, some paid tribute and some did not. There is no evidence to show that those who paid were one hundred per cent free from rats in their warehouses, but within a week there was ample proof that at least three wholesale groceries and one laundry had been invaded overnight by rats in sufficient quantity to cause thousands of dollars' worth of damages. Moyer & Perkins heard the news and decided to pay another five thousand.

The Defense Committee of the Chamber of Commerce was called to an extra meeting at the El Dorado Hotel. The owner of the hotel was one of the Committee, a man who, so far, had taken a very inactive part in its transactions. He did not waste time in giving the reason for the special meeting.

"I was called on the telephone this morning," he explained. "The person at the other end wanted to protect my hotel from rats for the small compensation of twenty-five thousand dollars a week. He referred casually to the three warehouses and one laundry that had been wrecked last week. Right at the present time I have, on an average, twelve hundred guests a night. They are here to be entertained, not to be frightened by rats. But here is the point. If I yield, every other hotel in the city will be placed in a similar position. Three hundred thousand strangers are in the city every day. Suppose that ten hotels were overrun with rats in one week and the fact was circulated in the press? What would that cost the city?"

"Better pay it," growled one of the men. He happened to own a hotel. He knew how temperamental was the pleasure-seeking stranger. Singularly, that advice was the only brand given by the rest of the Committee. They seemed strangely unable to offer any remedy except to keep on paying and in every way possible bar unpleasant news from the newspapers.

Inside of next month, fifty-five hotels were paying a weekly tax to the rat racketeers. One small hotel refused, and was at once deluged with an army of rats which drove out guests and employees, killed one old scrub woman and severely injured twenty of the cooks, waiters and porters who received the brunt of the rodent onslaught.

Moyer & Perkins were still paying the five thousand a week when, to their surprise, a visitor dropped into their office and casually suggested that they sell him their business.

"It used to be a good business," explained Moyer.

"It still is," interrupted Perkins. "What my partner means is this. We have our share of trade, but the overhead has become so heavy that we have not been able to make any money lately."

"That is what I understand," commented the stranger. "In fact, I was sent here by the Chamber of Commerce. They told me you had been paying money for rat protection. That is about the only reason I want to buy your business. Your business is supposed to be worth about two hundred thousand and your real estate as much more. Suppose I give you half a million and advise you to keep quiet about the sale?"

"You mean carry on the business under the old name?" asked Moyer, looking at the prospective buyer earnestly.

"Something like that."

The Englishman shook his head.

"Not and remain in this country! They kidnapped my son. No telling what they will do next, if the policies of the firm are changed. Anything that is done we shall be blamed for, no matter who really owns the business."

"Then, you and your partner take a vacation in Europe. You can afford it. All I am asking for is an exact account of your transactions with these racketeers, so I can have something to work on."

"May I ask what you want to do with the business?" interrogated the Junior Partner, Perkins.

"Certainly. I intend to use it as one of my experimental laboratories for the study of a mammal, known as the *Mus Norvegicus*, called, in common English, the brown rat. He is supposed to have originated from the *Mus Humiliatus* of Central Asia. Now will you gentlemen take the half million?"

"We will!" exclaimed Perkins. "Then may I ask your name?"

"Winifred Willowby."

"Not the one who is reputed to own more United States bonds than any other man in America?" gasped Richard Moyer.

"I won't admit that I do, but I am the man you are thinking about."

"Then I simply cannot understand why you want to mix up in this rat business."

"Simple enough. I am a hundred per cent American. For five generations my people have been born and buried in this city. I own over two hundred million dollars worth of land here. When the dregs of Europe come over to my city and use the rats of Asia to bleed that city white, then I personally protest. I am going to start something. I am not sure what, but when I finish, this city will be practically rat empty and gangster free."

"A large programme, Mr. Willowby," whispered Perkins.

"But I am a large man. Now, suppose I write you gentlemen a check?"

Five minutes later the two partners were alone. Moyer looked at the check, then put it in his pocket, and his hat on his head.

"Suppose we get it cashed?" he said to Perkins. "You can do as you please with your half, but I am going to take my family and go back to England. That man Willowby is only half pint size, but his blue eyes look cold to me, and I bet he plays a stiff game of bridge. If he starts fighting those gangsters, I do not want to be caught on the battlefield."

"How about starting a business over in England?" asked Perkins.

"Not a bad idea. I came over here and together we made half a million selling English groceries to Americans. Perhaps we can make a million more selling American groceries to Englishmen."

Winifred Willowby not only bought the grocery business of Moyer & Perkins; he bought a laundry, a small hotel, an apartment house and a theatre. He kept all the old employees, put in a manager, instructed that the weekly tribute should be paid as usual, and then disappeared from New York City.

Ten days later, in Paradise Valley, in the broken country below the Poconos of Pennsylvania, he entertained several men, each an authority in his special line of art or science. They kept the appointment, not being at all sure what it was for, but unable to refuse the invitation which was accompanied in each case with a substantial check. They had all heard of Willowby, but none had ever seen him. No doubt all were rather disappointed at his apparent lack of color and personality. They quickly changed their mind when he started to talk, for there was a man who, when he had something to say, was able to say it briefly and to the point.

"You men are all interested in rats," he began, "and so am I. You have worked with rats in one way or another for a good many years. Perhaps I ought to introduce you to each other. Mr. William Rastell has written the best biological study of rats in the English language. He has done for rats what Beebe did for the pheasant. Now the gentleman next to Mr. Rastell is Mr. Carol Crawford. I doubt if he ever actually saw or willingly handled a rat in all his life, but I am told he knows more about the folklore and traditions of the rat than any other living person. The third of my guests is Professor Wilson. He is the psychologist who has tried to breed different strains of rats, some of superior intelligence and others of the imbecile type. What I want you gentlemen to tell me is why these rats congregate at times in certain buildings of New York City, in such large numbers that they are a serious menace to property and even human life, and, then, as suddenly disappear as they appeared."

"Are they actually doing that?" asked Professor Wilson, who had suddenly become vitally interested in the conversation.

"Suppose they are?" queried Carol Crawford, answering the question for Willowby. "That is nothing more than they have done for centuries."

"Do you mean migratory movements?" asked the biologist, Rastell. "Rats have always migrated."

"I mean nothing of the kind," protested Crawford. "I mean their sudden appearance in a town or a building, their remaining there for a short time and then their sudden disappearance. The folklore and fairy tales are full of that sort of thing."

"That is why I asked you to come to this conference, Mr. Crawford," explained Willowby. "There is something peculiar happening in New York at the present time, and it has to do with rats and their actions. In some way rats of New York seem to be under the control of a set of racketeers who are able to force them to enter any building they select. The

rats come and go suddenly. It is all over in a little while, but when they are in the building, they do a lot of damage."

Mr. Crawford interrupted him.

"I doubt if you use the right word, when you say the rats were forced to enter the building. Perhaps you mean that the rats were by some means placed in such a psychic condition that they wanted to enter the building."

"That brings the matter into my field of research," insisted Professor Wilson. "I doubt the fact that they were forced, but if they wanted to, why that brings up all kinds of interesting questions."

"That is what I am after, gentlemen. I simply want to present the problem to you and have you solve it. I personally am satisfied with one thing. These rats are no different than the rats of five thousand years ago. They are just like the rats of classic Greece and imperial Rome. Maybe Mr. Crawford will tell us how they acted."

The antiquarian fairly beamed as he started to ride his favorite hobby-horse.

"Of course, the story everyone thinks of is the one concerning the Piper of Hamelin. It was in the year 1284. The rats were thick, and the Piper agreed to lead them out of the town for a certain sum. He played a pipe, no doubt some kind of flute, and the rats followed him. When the people refused to pay, he returned on the 26th of June, the feast of Saints John and Paul, and again played on the pipe. This time the children, one hundred and thirty in number, followed him into a cave and were lost. The date is well documented. A number of historians believe that it actually occurred, and on the gate of the town is the statement.

*"CENTUM TER DENOS CUM MAGUS AB URBE PUELLOS DUXERAT ANTE ANNOS CCLXXII CONDITA PORTA FUIT."*¹

"The same story is found, with variations, in all parts of the world. There is, for example, the story of the wicked Hatto, abbot of Fulda. He was visited by a swarm of rats who killed him. I can give you a dozen variations of that story, but in each of them the rats came and went, suddenly, as Mr. Willowby says they have been doing in New York."

"I should like to see a few examples of this mass movement of rats. I saw a lemming migration in Norway, but that was different," explained

1. When the magician (the Piper) had led the one hundred and thirty children out of the city, two hundred and seventy-two years before the gate was built.

Rastell. "It seems to me that if we actually saw one of these nocturnal attacks, we might learn why they wanted to do it."

"He is deadly right," agreed Professor Wilson. "A few actual facts are worth a hundred theories."

"That is why I have asked you to help me," explained the richest man in New York. "I have prepared some experimental stations for your use. I can put you in a grocery warehouse and guarantee that inside of a week you will see more rats than you ever dreamed of. I have a laundry and a small hotel. We can work out the details right now. All I am asking of you is to find out, when the rats come, *why they come* and, once we know that, we can do something to solve this problem."

"The game looks interesting," declared the Professor of rat psychology. "What I am interested in is why the rats do it. I am sure that it is because they want to do it, but are they forced to want to do it? It is a problem that will take a lot of research to solve, but Rastell and I can solve it. With all respects to our friend, Mr. Crawford, I think that he had better stay away and just keep on reading about his little pets. A few thousand vicious rats would be hard for him to deal with."

"I guess you are right," laughed Winifred Willowby. "Crawford and I will stay here and read about it while you two do the actual scientific work. By the way, Crawford, in that story of the Piper, what was given the credit for drawing the rats out of the town?"

"The tune that he played on the pipes!"

"Check and double check. Now I would advise you gentlemen to locate some musical instrument in that warehouse, and if you find one, experiment with it. Of course, you will have to be rather clever to find it. In the first place, the people putting it there will have it under cover and just as soon as the mischief is done they will remove it."

"It is nothing like that," laughed Professor Wilson, almost in scorn. "These are New York rats. It will take more than a little music to lead them from their usual haunts. But Rastell and I will start in at once. Give us the address of the buildings and the authority to use them. How shall we know when the rats are going to come?"

"They will appear within seven days after you stop the racket money. Suppose we adjourn the meeting? I want a few words in private with Mr. Crawford. You other gentlemen can get all the rest of the details from my secretary. He will arrange your salary and expense account. Good night."

He took Mr. Crawford into his bedroom.

"Do you really believe that story, Crawford?"

"I positively do. And the people believe it. The Piper walked down the Bungen-Strasse and to this day no music is ever played in that street. They even date time in that town from the day the children disappeared."

"Then, there must be something in it. Suppose we go over to Europe and find out something about that tune, the tune that drew the rats out of Hamelin?"

Rastell and Wilson followed out their programme. They went to the grocery warehouse and made a rat survey. There were a few rodents there but not many. Then they issued orders that the weekly payment of five thousand dollars be stopped. After that they spent their nights in the warehouse. On the fifth night the rats came by the thousands. They appeared to be hunting for something, but in the meantime, they ate and soiled whatever came their way. The local cats fought heroically, but were soon killed and eaten. The rats came up from the cellar through the elevator shafts, up the steps, through the cracks in the floor, up and up till they started to run around the roof. Then, at four in the morning, they started to leave, running down the steps in close formation, seemingly panic-stricken at their own temerity and anxious only to return to their safe, dark haunts. The two scientists, in their wire observation cage, closed their note book, opened the door of the cage, and started to make a careful search of the building. It revealed nothing but the bones of cats and much spoiled food.

For the next two days they worked carefully through every part of the building, hunting for something to explain the conduct of the rats. They found nothing. All that they were sure of was the fact that the rats had been there, and that they had not come back.

The following week they repeated the experiment in the laundry. The course of events was the same. The payment was refused, then the rats came, devoured and destroyed, stayed a night and left. Nothing was found. They decided to go and have a conference with Winifred Willowby, but he could not be located. The two scientists were left to their own resources. Having no other plausible plan of action, they selected the small hotel for their next experiment. This time they set a hundred wire traps and caught several hundred living rats. These they subjected to every known experiment, and at the end were forced to acknowledge

that all they had learned left them in ignorance as to why the rats came just for one night in such enormous numbers.

Two months later their employer sent for them. It appeared that he had just returned from Europe. He listened to their story, smiled kindly at their perplexity, suggested that they take a vacation and forget about rats for a while, paid all their bills, and discharged them. He even went so far as to say that he was uninterested in rats, that it had just been a passing hobby and that just at present he was working on other matters. So, he asked them to pass out of his life. But he and Carol Crawford went into the wilds of Pike County and did some experimenting on his own account.

Meantime, things were going from bad to worse in New York City. The rat racketeers were becoming bolder, and started to reach after larger game. There were rumors that the Pennsylvania Railroad was paying to protect its terminal and that the Interurban was being bled white to keep the rats out of the subway. Of course, much of this was rumor and none of it reached the newspapers, but there is no doubt about the fact that eight million people were becoming rat-conscious and rat-afraid. It was growing into a worth-while racket, and those behind it were rapidly acquiring more than riches; they were growing so powerful that they felt able to control the city government.

More than one business tried to resist and more than one business awoke to find that it owned nothing but ruins. Rat protection was worthless when the enemy came by the hundred thousand and even million. The only worth-while defense against the multitudinous enemy was the payment of the weekly tribute, small enough each week, but in the course of the year taking the profits from most of the firms compelled to pay. Within a year the average business in the city was working for the gangsters and content to, at least, be permitted to stay in business.

Then the racket was transferred to other cities, slowly and on a small scale at first; then more boldly. Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington began to feel the pressure. The profits were divided, but always the main share went to New York. For that was where the Big Boys were. And ruling the Big Boys was the Old Man, who was so little known and so seldom seen that his very existence was questioned by some of the smaller gangsters. No one knew how he had obtained his power, but no one was brave enough to deny it. The fact remained that he simply ruled; reigned like a Caesar; dictated like a Napoleon. From back-stage he pulled the wires to make his puppets dance.

It was this man who aroused the interest of Winifred Willowby. In other times, in former generations, in far-passed centuries, they might have ruled Rome together, or split it in two ways over their dying bodies. But in 1935 the short sword had been replaced by the ballot box and civil war by the primary election. Neither man had much that the other craved for, yet both prevented the other from the full enjoyment of life. But it was the blue-blooded patrician who at last gave in and secretly asked for an interview.

The conference was held on a fallen log on the shore of Porter's Pond in Pike County, Pa. Someone said that if Mark Hopkins sat on one end of a log and a student on the other end, it was a University; but, with Willowby on one end of the log and the Old Man on the other, it became nothing more than a conspiracy against the existence and the very life of the nation.

It was a strange sight, those two opposites on the log. The rich man, a little over five feet, barely a hundred pounds, with the body of a boy and the face of an angel. At the other end a large man, with the torso of an ape, and the face of a Titan, a man who had conquered by crushing, ruthlessly and devastatingly, all who had dared to oppose him. The two were great men, but they were equally lonely. Their very positions as leaders of their respective societies prevented any fraternizing with their followers.

"I do not want to waste your time, Mr. Consuelo," began Willowby. "We ought to be able to understand each other. You would do nicely if the Federal Government would leave you alone, but it has the peculiar ability of annoying you and interfering with your plans. Am I right?"

"Absolutely! Of course, it does not make any real difference—"

"But it does annoy you—investigations of your income tax and deporting your men now and then?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Simply this. After some years of effort, I am at last able to say that I control the Government."

"That is the silly brag of a child," sneered the Old Man.

"Not at all," and as he said that, Willowby reached down and picked up a handful of pebbles. "See these stones? In the same way I hold in my hand a majority of the Supreme Court, over two-thirds of the Senators and most of the Representatives. I can swing the votes of enough of the states to pass any kind of legislation I wish. Now here is my proposition.

You handle the cities. I will turn over the country to you. Together we will run the nation, and all I want is just one thing—just one little favor from you."

"I bet I can guess what that is," laughed the Old Man.

"No doubt, but let me tell you. I want to be the next President."

"I thought so."

"I think we ought to be together on this thing. Perhaps I could be elected without your help, even in spite of your opposition. But if I am, I will, naturally, try to destroy you. We might end up like the Kilkenny cats. But if we are allies, I have eight years of power and you have eight years of liberty in which to plunder the richest nation in the world. How about it?"

The Old Man drew a deep breath.

"Is this on the level?"

"It has to be. I have a reputation, and it is respectable. I am placing myself in your hands. What is there to prevent you from giving the press an interview tomorrow?"

"You would deny it!"

"But no one would listen to me."

"I suppose not. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to give the order to your leaders. There are a hundred of them, perhaps a few more. No doubt my list is not absolutely accurate. Call them in, from Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, Boston and Philadelphia. Have them all in one room. You introduce me. Let me talk to them. I will open the war chest, fifty million to start with, and more to come. You promise them anything you want, and I will make the promise good."

"And you will be there? Right in the room with me?"

"I will be there."

"I won't do it!" growled the Old Man. "I never have and I never will. I don't do things that way. A whisper to one or two, and the business is done, but not a hundred at one time. Some of these boys have never seen me."

"Then you want to turn me down?"

"Not exactly, but I am opposed to that meeting."

"Then we are through talking. I will take you to the five-ten train, or, if you want to, I will have my chauffeur drive you to the city."

"Let's talk it over."

"No."

"How about having six of the Big Boys there?"

"No! All on my list or none."

"Your list?"

"Certainly! I am not sure that it is absolutely correct, but it satisfies me."

"Let me see it."

"No reason why you should not."

The Old Man took the paper that was handed to him. It was no casual glance, he gave the names. At last he handed it back to the little man with the casual comment:

"I suppose that is not all you know about my organization?"

"I suppose not. Why not be sensible about this, Mr. Consuelo? If we fight, we will simply kill each other, but if we become allies who can stop us? But I must be sure of you, and the only way I can be sure is to have you talk to your men, and then let me talk to them. We can have the meeting at night in my offices, you know where, top floor of the Empire Trust. No one need be any the wiser. Half an hour, and all the men can go back with the money in their pockets and the orders in their brains."

"O.K. When shall we meet?"

"A month from today at ten P.M."

"Good. I'll give the orders, but I want the money, the fifty million. It is not much, but part of it will help keep the Big Boys in line. Some of them won't like the idea very much."

"A little cash will influence them. Now, how about taking you back to the city?"

Winifred Willowby made preparations for entertaining his one hundred guests. His largest office was transformed into an assembly room. Its inch-thick carpets, overstuffed chairs and mahogany trimmings gave it an air of luxuriant comfort. There were special chairs for the Big Boys and two very special chairs for the Old Man and the Host of the evening.

A large picture frame, hanging on one wall, and carefully covered, gave a hint as to part of the evening's ceremony.

The Empire Trust belonged to Willowby. He had built it so that he could have a private office on the top floor, the sixty-third from the ground. The elevator reached this floor, but there were no steps. Many buildings surpassed it in height, but none in the view that it gave of the city. The guests who arrived first commented on the view and expanded their chests when they realized that they carried that city in their vest pockets.

At last every chair was occupied. It was a peculiar gathering. It included judges, politicians, pseudo-business men, several lawyers and even the Mayor of one of the largest cities in the Mississippi Valley. Facing them, sat the Old Man and Willowby.

Of the hundred men in the audience not one was at his ease. Most had come because they were afraid to stay away. Many hoped that they would not be recognized. The majority doubted the wisdom of such a meeting and felt that the Old Man was slipping mentally. It was the first time that many of them had even seen him. He was almost as much of an unknown to them as the little man sitting next to him. A peculiar silence hung over the assembly. More than one man fondled the handle of his automatic. No one seemed to be sure of what was going to happen next. It was a fortunate thing that the meeting was held at night; with the audience composed of such men. A daylight gathering would have been impossible.

The Old Man and Willowby held a short whispered conference, and then the leader of American Racketeers stood up. What had been silence before, now became the hush of death. The Old Man was going to talk, and everyone wanted to hear what he had to say. It did not take him long to start.

"You Big Boys have been running the cities before," he growled, "but from tonight on we are going to run the country. Congress and the Supreme Court are going to dance to our music and like it. Our new friend here has promised to deliver the goods, and he does not want much in return. I have told him that we will trade, and what I say goes. Now, you boys listen to Willowby, and remember that I am back of him."

Then he sat down. As far as the records are concerned, that was the longest speech the Old Man made in his life. The Boys hardly knew what to do; they felt they should applaud, but not being certain remained quiet. Then Willowby stood up.

"I do not want very much, gentlemen," he remarked. "I only want to be the next President of the United States, and I can be, with your help. Let me show you a picture."

He walked over to the covered picture, pulled a cord and unveiled it and there, life size, were the Old Man and Willowby shaking hands. Anyone could tell who they were and what they were doing. That brought the house down. Everybody felt that it was time for a little noise. Some of them, who knew the Big Boy well enough, went up and congratulated him on the new political alliance. In the confusion, Winifred Willowby slipped out of the room and no one noticed his absence.

But some one did notice the sideboard and started to sample the bottles. Soon everyone was drinking a little. But the Old Man did not drink. He just sat there, moodily chewing his cigar and wondering how much of the fifty million he could keep for his share.

Nobody saw the first rat. It dropped from behind the picture and ran under a chair. The next rat did the same. Perhaps fifty rats were in the room before their presence was noticed. By that time they were coming faster, by the dozen, by the hundred. That was different. One rat in a large room meant nothing. A hundred, five hundred in the same room could mean almost anything.

And now they were literally pouring out from back of the picture. A cursing man pulled it to the floor and there was a large hole in the wall, two feet in diameter, and out of that hole the rats were pouring, big brown, hungry rats, dropping to the floor and starting to hunt for food. The puzzled men jumped up on top the chairs; the rats stood on their hind legs and looked at the large chunks of food with black beady, binoculars. The Old Man just sat there, chewing his cigar and cursing. He knew what it all meant seconds before anyone else.

A number of the most fearful men made a dash for the elevator. They were driven back by a torrent of rats climbing up the elevator shaft. Then *fear came—and panic*. With gun and heel, and broken chairs for clubs, they started in to kill rats, and for every one they killed, a hundred fastened to them with chisel teeth. To make it worse, the lights went out, and they were there in the dark, with mutilation as a beginning and death as an ending, and still the rats poured into the room, up the elevator shaft and out of the hole in the wall.

The Old Man walked across the room, kicking the struggling bodies of his followers out of his pathway. Rats ran up his legs and tried to bite his

hands, his face; he swept them off him as a tiger would wipe ants off his fur; at last he came to the window. There was the city of New York in front of him, the city of a million twinkling lights, the tomb of a billion dead hopes; the Morgue of a Nation, covered by laughing, painted faces. He raised the sash and sat on the sill.

"Damn Willowby!" he said. "What a fool I was. But I am going to die clean. No rat is going to send me to Hell!"

And then he dropped.

In the room the struggle kept on—for an hour and then two. At last the screaming ceased, and the only sound was the gnawing of the rats, the crunching of their teeth and their satisfied, little squeaks of pleasure.

The next morning Winifred Willowby called on the Chief of the Secret Service of New York. With him were several men from Washington.

"I want to tell you something," he said. "A large group of men borrowed my office to have a meeting last night. They wanted privacy and secrecy and they had heard of my place in the Empire Trust Building. So I loaned them the entire floor for the night. But my janitors tell me that something terrible happened. An army of rats invaded the place, as they have been doing with other places in the city, and literally ate every man there; that is, all except one, a fellow by the name of Consuelo, and he preferred to jump out of a window and die clean on the pavement."

"Consuelo?" asked the Chief. "Not the Old Man? Not *that* Consuelo?"

"I think that is the one. Here is a list of the men who were there. I thought you might like to look it over before you gave it to the papers."

The Chief took the list and read it, puzzled.

"Do you mean these men were there last night?"

"I understand so."

"And now they are dead?"

"I think so. Of course, that is for the coroner to say."

"Do you know who these men were?"

"I suppose they were business associates of Consuelo. At least, that is what he told me."

"They were the hundred biggest gangsters in America. They were the brains of everything vicious in American society. There is not a man there whom we have not been after for years, but we just couldn't pin anything on them. Their death in one night gives the decent people in

our country a new lease on life. We can go ahead now and get the little fellows. But, tell me, Mr. Willowby, how did it happen?"

"I told you. They had a meeting and the rats came. You know there was a rat racket which no one thoroughly understood. Anyway, the rats came—and killed them. No one can tell exactly what did happen, because everyone who was there was killed. That is all. I am sorry that it happened in my office—but I thought I was doing the man a favor to loan him the place for the meeting."

That night Crawford and Willowby were talking things over. In rushed Rastell and Wilson, brushing the indignant butler aside.

"We have heard a thousand rumors," began Rastell, "and read as many foolish statements in the papers about the rat tragedy, and we just couldn't wait a minute longer. You just have to tell us what happened. We are not going to leave you till you do."

"You tell them, Crawford," whispered Willowby. "Whenever I talk about it, my voice becomes squeaky."

"It happened this way," explained Crawford. "After you started to work, Mr. Willowby decided to go over and study the story of the Piper right in the town of Hamelin. We went there and there was no doubt that the town people really believed that it really happened. They told us all about it, and the more we listened and paid them, the more they told. They gave us the very tune the Piper played to make the rats follow him. It was a simple little thing, and we made some phonograph records of it. It seems that when the rats hear that tune, they want to get as close as they can to the source of the music. Then one old man—he gave us some additional bars which he claimed drove the rats frantic for blood, and we made a record of that also.

"Afterwards we came back to America and went up into Pike County. Not so many rats there but enough to experiment with. We tried the short tune and the long tune and they worked on the American rats just like they did on the Hamelin ones. We put two and two together and decided that the rat racketeers in New York were using this method of attracting rats. Just put a repeating phonograph in a building and start it playing, and then the rats would come and eat everything to pieces. Of course, we did not know the psychology of it, but I suppose it has something to do with the effect of musical vibrations on the rat's nervous system.

"Then Mr. Willowby thought that it would be a good idea to make a great rat trap and attract all the rats in the city to it. He had a good deal of work done in the Empire Trust, and rigged up a phonograph with a lot of loud speakers in different parts of the basement. He ran a lot of ropes down a ventilating shaft for the rats to climb on. I think it was his original idea to have them come up to his office by the millions and then use some kind of gas on them. At least, he wanted to get rid of the rats. Someone must have turned on the phonograph with the entire record. Mr. Willowby left the room, went down the elevator and being somewhat absent-minded, told the elevator boy that he could go for the night. Of course, he was surprised to hear all about it the next morning. All he wanted to do was to get rid of the rats."

"Exactly!" purred Mr. Winifred Willowby.

And he lit another cigarette.

THE END

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Amazing Stories* April 1956 and was first published in *Amazing Stories* November 1931. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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