

The Rhythm of the Rats

Eric Frank Russell

The village of despair lay in a fold of tree-shrouded hills. Its name shall not be spoken, neither shall its nationality be told. There are those among us whose curiosity knows no restraint; others who are magnetically drawn by the dreadful. One must tell the tale in manner calculated to protect the foolish from their follies or not tell it at all. Suffice to say that the village was placed far off the beaten track even of foot-walking tourists, and its brooding inhabitants did not speak English on those rare occasions when they spoke at all.

There were sixty houses in the village, one-third of them straggling alongside the cattle-track which served as its main road, the rest climbing the heights behind and lurking half-hidden in a welter of pine firs and mountain ash. All these abodes were of timber, highly ornamented, and would have been considered picturesque had they not oozed an elusive but easily sensed aura of overwhelming sadness.

Quiet, slow-moving folk lived in this forgotten hamlet, passing each other silently in the course of their daily tasks, fix-faced, fix-eyed, unemotional in the manner of those long emptied of human passions. Spiritual wells run dry forever. Shadow-people almost without substance.

I found this place by veritable accident. A plane crashed amid pines close behind the ruined castle of the Giant Ghormandel. Flung headlong into flexible pine which caught me, waved me to and fro before it dropped me into a bed of ferns, I was the sole survivor.

The plane crackled and spat and flared furiously a little lower down the hill. Adjacent tree trunks exploded like cannon under pressure of boiling sap and resin. Ferns withered, turned brown and paperlike, became flames. Rabbits scuttled in all directions, weasels with them. Birds whirred away squawking. Smoke poured cloud-high. Blackened bodies posed roasting in the fuselage, and the pilot—still in his cockpit—sat with bowed and steaming head. It was terrible.

To tell the truth, the scene sickened me far more than did the narrowness of my own escape. That sudden, unwanted cremation amid the trees, with the castle ruins grinning like rotten teeth, and the dark, unfriendly green of the hills, the scowling skies all made a scene such as one carries for the remainder of one's life. It was a picture of death, red and rampant.

There was nothing I could do to help anyone, nothing at all. The plane's complement already was far beyond human assistance. Somewhat bruised and considerably shocked, but otherwise unharmed, I made my way down the hillside and found a tiny brook which I followed as it meandered through a thickly forested area that still sloped, though gradually. The atmosphere grew heavier, more morbid as I descended. By the time the village was near the air had become thick, oppressive and lay like a weight upon my mind. It created that unpleasant sensation

of an impending headache that never manages to arrive.

A smell of wood-smoke came from the village although no chimney was visibly active. Not the pleasing, aromatic scent which greets one in wood-burning communities, but rather an acrid odor suggesting the combustion of rotting bark and dried fungi.

Four people saw me as I came by the end pair of houses. Two men, two women, all middle-aged. Their attire was well cared for in the matter of stitching and patching but the colors had long faded toward dark browns and grays. It was sartorial companionship for the colors of their souls, all browns and grays. The two men bore shepherds' crooks; the women carried brass-bound wooden buckets. All four looked at me with the subdued surprise of those who have not registered a true emotion for countless years. As I came up to them, the elder man said swiftly to the others, speaking in a language I could understand, "Something has gone wrong. Leave this to me." He took a step toward me, lifting his brows inquiringly.

I told him about the plane, pointing to the castle of the Giant Ghormandel and the pale, thin wisp of smoke creeping upward behind it. My speech was swift, rather incoherent, and made with complete disregard of grammatical rules of a language which was not my own. Nevertheless, he got the gist of it. Events must have tried me more than I'd realized, for immediately it was evident that he understood, I felt weak in the pit of my stomach and sat in the cattle-track to beat myself to the fall. The world commenced whirling as he bent to support me, stooping over me like a mighty ghost. Later, it could not have been much later, I found myself in bed staring at a row of copper pots lined upon the mantelshelf, and a religious picture on the wall. The pots were dull but not dusty. The picture was faded, a little spotty. The window curtains had been darned but not dyed; they swayed in a slight draught, old and colorless. Even the wallpaper had been carefully stuck down where it tended to curl but was so aged that it should have been replaced years before. The general impression was not one of extreme poverty, but rather of tidiness which has been brought to its minimum in terms of bare necessity, a natural neatness which has been deprived of heart by causes unknown.

Presently the man to whom I had spoken came in. Let him be called Hansi because that was not his name. He came to my bed, blank-faced as a wooden image, and addressed me in tones devoid of vibrancy. It was like hearing the mechanical voice of an automaton.

"You are feeling better?"

I nodded. "Yes, thank you."

"That is good." He hesitated, went on. "Had you any friends or relations in that machine?"

"None."

If he was surprised he did not show it. His eyes turned toward me, turned away. He thought a while.

"We have sent a party to recover the bodies. The authorities will be notified as

soon as possible."

"You could telephone them," I suggested.

"There is no telephone. There is no car. There is nothing." He said it in a dull monotone.

"Then how do you—?"

"We walk. Did not the good God give us legs with which to walk? So we walk along eighteen miles of tracks and woodland trails and across two rope bridges to the nearest telephone. No vehicle can get here. The bodies will have to be carried out." His eyes came back again. "As you will have to be carried if you cannot walk."

"I can walk," I told him.

"Eighteen miles?" His eyebrows rose a little.

"Well... well—" I hesitated.

"It is a pity the hour is so late," he continued, staring at the window as if it framed something pertaining to his remark. "Night comes upon us very soon. If you had been here earlier we might have got you away before the fall of darkness. But now"— he shook his head slowly—"it is impossible. You must stay—one night." He repeated it, making it significant. "One night."

"I don't mind," I assured.

"We do!"

I sat up, putting my legs out of bed and pressing my feet on the floor to feel the firmness of it. "Why?"

"There are reasons," he evaded. Going to the window, he peered out. Then he closed the window, doing it with considerable care, making sure that it latched tightly and that the latch was firmly home. Finally he fastened the latch with a strong padlock. It was now impossible to open the casement, while its panes were far too small to permit escape after the glass had been removed. Patting the pocket in which he had put the key, he remarked, "That is that!"

After watching this performance I had a deep and frightening sense of imprisonment. It must have shown in my features, but he chose to ignore it. Facing me, he asked, "Do you like music?"

"Some," I admitted.

His lips thinned, drew back to expose white teeth, and he said with a sudden and surprising venom that shocked me, "I hate music! We all hate music!"

This contrast with his previous impassiveness lent a terrible emphasis to his words. It was an uncontrolled burst of passion from a source I'd mistakenly thought dried up. It had all the elements of the unexpected, unnerving the listener as if he had heard and seen a marble statue part its lips and curse.

"I hate music! We all hate music!"

Without saying more, he went away.

Some ten or fifteen minutes afterward I decided that boredom served only to enhance hunger. The recent disaster still affected me, the thick, cloying atmosphere weighed heavily upon me. I needed something to eat and I yearned for company other than that of my own thoughts. Putting on shoes, I pulled open the only door and left the room.

Going slowly down an ornate but unpolished wooden staircase, I reached a small hall. A dull fire glowed at one end, gave off the acrid smell noticed earlier. Nearby, a crudely wrought table was covered with a gray cloth. The walls were paneled, without picture or ornament of any kind. A bookcase full of dusty, seldom-used tomes stood at one side.

There had been time only to survey all this when a woman appeared through an archway at the other end. She was forty or thereabouts, tall, slender and as sad-faced as any yet seen. Though her features remained set, a most peculiar expression lurked within her eyes as she looked at me, a sort of hunger, an intense yearning tempered and held in check by horror.

All she said was, "You wish for food?" and her eyes tried to draw me to her while, at the same time, thrusting me away.

"Yes, lady," I admitted, watching her and wondering what lay behind that peculiar gaze. Her desire for me was in no way embarrassing. Indeed, I felt within me that it was clean, decent, but pitiful because of its thwarting.

Without another word she turned, went into the kitchen beyond the arch, came back with black bread, heather-honey and fresh milk. I sat at the table and enjoyed my meal as best I could despite that she spent the whole time standing near the fire and eating me with her eyes. She did not speak again until I had finished.

"If you go outside you must be back before dark, well before dark."

"All right, lady." Anything to please her. Inwardly, I could conceive no prospect more dismal than that of wandering around this village after dark. It was dispiriting enough in broad daylight.

For some time, I don't know how long since I did not possess a watch, I explored the hamlet, studied its houses, its people. The longer I looked at them the more depressed I felt. Their abodes were strangely devoid of joy. The folk were quite uncommunicative without being openly unsociable. None spoke to me, though several women looked with the same hungry horror displayed by the one in Hansi's house. It was almost as if they desired something long forbidden and triply accursed, something of which I was the living witness, therefore to be both wanted and feared.

My own uneasiness grew toward twilight. It was the accumulative effect of all this unnaturalness plus the gradual realization that the village was lacking in certain respects. It had vacuums other than spiritual ones. Certain features normal to village life were missing; I could *feel* them missing without being able to decide what they were.

Not until dusk began to spread and I reached the door of Hansi's house did it

come to my mind that no truly domestic animals had been visible. The place was devoid of them. I had seen a small herd of cattle and a few mountain goats, but not one cat, not one dog.

A moment later it struck me with awful force that neither had I seen a child. That was what was wrong—not a child!

Indoors, the tall woman gave me supper, early though the hour. As before, she hung around pathetically wanting and not-wanting. Once she patted my shoulder as if to say, "There! There!" then hurriedly whipped her hand away. My mind concocted a scary notion of her quandary; that to give comfort was to pass sentence of death. It frightened me. How foolish it is to frighten oneself.

Soon after total darkness Hansi came in, glanced at me, asked the woman, "Are the casements fastened? All of them?"

"Yes, I have seen to them myself."

It did not satisfy him. Methodically he went around trying the lot, upstairs and downstairs. The woman seemed to approve rather than resent this implied slur upon her capabilities. After testing each and every latch and lock, Hansi departed without another word.

Selecting a couple of books from the case, I bore them up to my room, closed the door, examined the window. The latch had been so shaped as to fit into a hasp, and the padlock linking the two was far beyond my strength to force open. So far as could be told, all other windows were secured in similar manner.

The place was a prison. Or perhaps a madhouse. Did they secretly consider me insane? Could it be that they had not actually gone to the wrecked plane because they thought my story a lunatic's fancy? Or, conversely, were they themselves not of sound mind? Had fate plunged me into some sort of national reservation for people who were unbalanced? If so, when—and how— was I going to escape?

Beyond my window ran a footpath edging the gloomy firs and pines that mounted to the top of a hill. The woods were thick, the path narrow and shadowy, but a rising moon gradually illuminated the lot until one could see clearly. It was there, right outside my window, that I saw what will remain in my worst dreams forever.

The books had amused me for three hours with a compost of outlandish stories and simply expressed folk tales of such a style that evidently they were intended for juveniles. Tiring, I turned down the oil-lamp, had a last look out of the window before going to bed.

The two men were strolling along the path, one bearing a thick cudgel held ready on his shoulder, the other carrying a gun. Opposite my window they paused, looked into the trees. Their attitudes suggested expectancy, wariness and stubborn challenge. Nothing happened.

Continuing their patrol, they went three or four paces, stopped. One of them felt in his pocket, bent down and appeared to be fumbling around the region of his own boots. I had my cheek close against the cold glass as I strove to see what he was

doing. A moment later I discovered that he was feeding a small rat which was sitting on its haunches and taking his offerings in paws shaped like tiny hands.

They walked on. The rat followed, gambolling behind them, its eyes gleaming fitfully in the moonlight and resembling little red beads. Just as the two men passed out of my sight several more rats emerged from the undergrowth and ran eagerly in the same direction.

Sneaking out of the door, I crossed a passage, entered the front room which was furnished but unoccupied. This room's windows overlooked the cattle-track which formed the main stem. In due time the two men returned to view, complete with cudgel and gun. They had the wary bearing of an armed patrol performing a regular and essential duty. Eight rats, all small and crimson-eyed, followed very close upon their heels.

As they neared my vantage point a woman came out of the house right opposite, seated herself on its step and tossed tidbits from a large bag on her lap. Rats swarmed around her, scuttling gray shapes that came from the shadows and the darker places.

I could not hear their excited squeaking; the casement was too close-fitting for that. The woman reached out her hand and petted one or two and they responded by fawning upon her. If only the light had been stronger I am sure it would have revealed her formerly pale, wan face now glowing with love... love for the rats.

Daytime surliness, secret fear, a mixed desire and revulsion for the lonely stranger, night-time affection for rats—what did all these things mean? It was too much for me. I had nothing in common with isolated mountain folk such as these. Tomorrow, at all costs, I must get away.

By this time the patrolling men had passed on and the woman was alone with her rodents. Returning to my own room, I had another look at the path, saw nothing other than a solitary rat which ran across as if anxious to join its fellows in the village. The moon was a little higher, its light a little stronger. Dark conifers posed file on file, a silent army awaiting the order to descend the hill.

I went to bed, lay there full of puzzled, apprehensive thoughts, and—let me confess it—nervous, uneasy, too restless to sleep. As the night-hours crawled tediously on and the moonbeams strengthened, the air grew lighter, colder, less oppressive, more invigorating.

This peculiarity of the atmosphere waxed so greatly that it created a strange tenseness within me, an inexplicable feeling of expecting something grave and imminent. So powerful did this sensation become that eventually I found myself sitting up in bed, cold and jumpy, ears straining for they knew not what, eyes upon the brilliant window which at any moment might frame a face like none seen before in this or any other world.

That such pointless but wide-awake anxiety was silly, I knew full well, yet I could not help it, could not control it. I strove to divert my mind by wondering whether that woman was still bestowing love upon her rats, and by listening for the passing

footsteps of the patrol. Then, as my eyes remained fixed upon the casement, something came through as easily as did the moonbeams. One moment there was the utter silence of a waiting world; the next, it was through the window and in the room with me.

It was nothing that I could see. It could only be heard and then not with the ears. Insidiously it penetrated the locked timber frame and tight panes of the casement, pierced the very walls of the house, passed through the bones of my skull and registered deep within my mind. A thin, reedy fluting which sounded sweet and low.

So soft and surreptitious was the sound that at first I mistook it for a figment of the imagination, but as I sat and stared at the window the music persisted and gradually swelled as if its source were creeping nearer, nearer.

Presently it was quite loud though still within my mind and completely unbearable with my ears. It waxed and waned, joyful and plaintive by turns, sobbing down the scale and chuckling up it, weeping a little and laughing a lot. An outlandish theme ran through its trills and flourishes as a cord runs through a string of pearls. There was a weird rhythm beating steadily within the tones and half-tones, a haunting off-beat, fascinating, mind-trapping—and beckoning, continually beckoning.

Somehow I knew that it was for my mind alone, that others in the village could not hear what I could hear. It went on and on, calling me, summoning me, and its spasms of laughter drove away all fear until I wanted to laugh with it, carefree and joyously. So powerful was its attraction that it drew me from bed, toward the window where I stood and stared into the moonlight. There was nothing voluntary about that action. My bemused mind obeyed the urge without previous thought; my legs responded to my mind and bore me to the window. I got there with no remembrance of the going. I merely arrived.

The pines and firs still stood in close array. The path was clearly lit and completely empty. Not a soul was to be seen, yet the eerie music continued without let or pause and the whole world seemed to be waiting, waiting for some unguessable culmination.

My face was pressed close against the glass, almost trying to push through it and get me nearer, if only an inch nearer, to that glorified flood of notes. The lilt chimed and tinkled like fairy bells within my brain, and as it repeated again and again its quality of attraction grew progressively stronger. It was a case of familiarity breeding desire where, had I only known the truth, there would have been inutterable horror and a mighty fear.

At moments the tonal sequences suggested speech though I could hear no actual words. But words came with them into my mind from I knew not where, insinuated with wondrous cunning beyond my capacity to understand. It was as if certain ecstatic chords conjured parallel phrases, creating a dreadful dream-poetry which percolated through the night.

Oh, come and tread the lazy leaves

*And dance through scented heather,
Play hide and seek amid the sheaves,
Or vault the hills together.
Cast care away before the dawn;
With me for everlasting
Run free while mothers sit and mourn,
A little rat*

I lost the run of words just then because a brief glimpse of color showed between the standing trees while the music grew enormously both in volume and enticement. My whole attention remained riveted upon the trees until shortly a being stepped forth and posed upon the path, full in the light of the moon. Tall and terribly thin, he wore a bi-colored jerkin of lurid yellow and red with a peaked and feathered cap to match. Even his up-pointed slippers were colored, one yellow, one red. A slender flute was in his hands, one end to his mobile lips, the other aimed straight at my window. His long, supple fingers moved with marvelous dexterity as he subjected me to a musical stream of irresistible invitation.

His face! I looked upon it and did not cease to look upon it all the time I tore at the casement's latch, heaved upon its chain, struggled desperately to burst the lock asunder. I wanted to get out, how madly, insanely I wanted to get out, to run free beneath the moon, to dance and prance, to mope and mow, to gabble and gesticulate and vault the hills while mothers mourned.

Unknown to me, my own voice alternately moaned my mortification and shouted my rage at being thwarted while I lugged and tugged in crazy endeavor to tear the window wide open. My ears were incapable of hearing my own noises, or any others for that matter. I was concentrating tremendously and exclusively upon that magnetic tune coming from outside and the moonlit visage of he who was producing it. A pane of glass broke into a hundred shards and blood flowed on my hand, yet I saw nothing but the face, heard nothing but its song.

It was an idiot face with enormous laughing eyes. A drooling, drooping, loose-hung, imbecilic countenance in which the optics shone with clownish merriment. It was the face of my friend, my brother, my mother, my boon companion, my comrade of the night, my only joyful ally in this sullen and hostile world. The face of he without whom I would be utterly alone, in ghastly solitude, for ever and ever, to the very end of time. I wanted him.

Heavens, how hungrily I wanted him! Beating at the window, I screamed my desperate need for him.

There were feet moving below somewhere within the house, and heavy feet coming upstairs, hurriedly, responding to a sudden urgency. If my ears heard them they did not tell me. I stood in the full, cold glare of moonlight and hammered futilely

at my prison bars and drank in that idiot face still uttering its piping call to come away and play.

Just as someone pushed open my bedroom door the flute-player made one swift and graceful step backward into the trees. At the same moment there came from the side of the house to my left a tremendous crash like that of an ancient and overloaded blunderbuss. Leaves, twigs and bits of branches sprang away from the trees and showered over the yellow-red figure.

The music ceased at once. To me its ending was as awful as the loss of the sun, leaving a world swamped in darkness. Verily a light-o'-laughter had become extinguished and there was nothing around me but the gray-brown souls of the immeasurably sad.

I clawed and scrabbled at the casement in futile effort to bring back the magic notes but while the torn leaves still were drifting the fluter receded farther into the shadows and was gone. Once, twice there was a gleam of color, yellow and red, in the tree gaps higher up the hill. After that, no other sign. He had escaped to a haunt unknown; he had gone with his calling pipe and his sloppy face and his great, grinning eyes.

Hansi came behind me, snatched me away from the window, threw me on the bed. His big chest was heaving but his features were as though set in stone. Having reached its extreme my emotional pendulum was now on its back-swing, a revulsion was making itself felt. I offered no resistance to Hansi, made no protest, but lay on the bed and watched him while my mind incubated a terrible fear born of the narrowness of my escape.

Moving a heavy, wheel-back chair near to the window, Hansi sat himself in it, showed clearly that he was there for the remainder of the night. He did not say a word. His bearing was that of one whose only weapon against powers of darkness is an uncompromising stubbornness.

Increasing coldness persuaded me to pull the bedcovers over myself. I lay flat on my back, perspiring freely and shivering at the same time, and vaguely sensing the stickiness of partially congealed blood on one hand. Sounds from outside came clearly through the broken pane: a dull snapping of trodden twigs, stamping of boots, mutter of voices as hunters sought in vain for the body of the hunted.

Soon I went to sleep, exhausted with a surfeit of nervous strain. Dreams came to me, some muddled and inconsequential, one topical and horribly vivid. In that one I was blissfully running at the heels of a prancing imbecile, drinking in his never-ending song and following him through dell and thicket, across moonlit glades and streams, climbing higher always higher until we reached Ghormandel's shattered walls. And there he turned and looked at me, still piping. I was small, very small—and had a thin, hairless tail.

They rushed me away with the morning. I had breakfast in a hurry, set off with Hansi and a solemn, lantern-jawed man named Klaus. A few women stood at their doorways and watched me go, their eyes yearning and spurning precisely as they

had done before. I felt that they regretted my departure and yet were glad, immensely glad. One waved to me and I waved back. No other responded. The sadness of the village deepened as we left, deepened to an awful sorrow too soul-searing to forget.

One hour's march, fifteen minutes' rest; one hour's march, fifteen minutes' rest. At a steady pace of three miles an hour the trip was easy. By the fourth rest-period the giant's castle had shrunk to no more than a faintly discernible excrescence upon a distant rise. I sat on a stone, watched the nearest trees and listened with my mind.

"Hansi, who was it that came in the night?"

"Forget him," he advised curtly.

I persisted, "Does he belong to the ruined castle?"

"In a way." He got up, prepared to move on. "Forget him—it is best."

We continued on our way. I noticed that neither man eyed the trees as I eyed them, nor listened as I listened. They progressed in stolid silence, following the path, looking neither to the right nor left. It seemed to be accepted that by day they were free from that which was to be feared by night.

Mid-afternoon, footsore but not tired, we arrived at a small country town. It may have been sleepy and backward, but by my standards it was full of vivacity and sophistication. One could not help but contrast its bustling liveliness with the dreary, anaemic place from which I had come.

Hansi had a long talk with the police who made several telephone calls, gave me a meal, filled up forms which Hansi signed. They issued me with a train-ticket. Hansi accompanied me to the station. There, I used half an hour's wait to pester him again.

"Who was it? Tell me!"

He gave in reluctantly, speaking like one forced to discuss a highly distasteful subject. "He is the son of his father and the son of his mother."

"Of course," I scoffed. "What else could he be?"

Ignoring me, he went on. "Long ago his mother used her evil arts to kill his father, Ghormandel. From then on she ruled the roost by fire, bell, candle and incantation—until our reckless forefathers had had enough of her." He paused a moment, stared dully at the sky. "Whereupon they trapped her by trickery and burned her for the foul old witch she was."

"Oh!" I felt a cold shiver on me.

"And then they hunted her son, her only child, who was half-wizard, half-witch, but he escaped. Hiding in a place afar, he developed his dark talents and bided his time for vengeance."

"Go on," I urged as he showed signs of leaving it at that.

"When he was ready, he tested his powers in a distant town. They worked perfectly. So he came back to us... and took away our children."

"What?"

"He charmed them away," said Hansi, grim and bitter. "Every one but those able only to crawl—and even those strove to squirm from us. From that day to this he has slunk around like a beast in the night, waiting, always waiting. Most of our women are afraid to have children. The few who dare have to send them to distant relatives until they reach adulthood or, alternatively, lock them in the *kinderhaus* between every dusk and dawn." He glanced at me. "Where I was locked for many years. Where you were locked last night."

"Only at night?" I asked.

He nodded. "There is no peril by day. Why, I do not know. But always he is ready by night, ready to take a child—and give us back another rat!"

"You mean... he changes them?"

"We cannot say for certain. We suspect it. We fear it." His big hand clenched into a knotted fist. A vein stood out on his forehead. "Children have gone, fix-eyed, with outreaching hands, like blind ones feeling their way—and rats have come back, tame, playful, wanting food and mother-love." His voice deepened, became harsh. "Some day we shall deal with him as our forefathers dealt with the witch who bore him. If the people of that distant town had killed him when he was in their hands—"

"What town?"

He said, briefly but devastatingly, "Hamelin."

Then the train came in.

At this date I often wonder whether the stones of the Giant Ghormandel's castle still rot upon that fateful hill; whether far beneath them lies that accursed village in which it is dangerous to be born. I wonder, too, whether that long, lean shape in red and yellow yet roams light-footed beneath the moon, laughing and gibbering and piping its terrible invitation.

So far, I have had no desire to return and see for myself. The elements of dread are stronger than curiosity despite that the passage of years has made it safe for me to go. It was anything but safe when I was there. Then, I had needed the watchful protection of the sad ones at a mere nine years of age.