

The Mouse-Tower



Below Bingen, in the middle of the Rhine, there is a lonely island on which a stronghold can be seen. This keep is called “the Mouse-Tower”, and there is an old and horrific tale of how it came by this name.

Hatto, the Archbishop of Mayence, was an ambitious, heartless, and perfidious man, as well as cruel towards the poor. He extorted taxes from his people, imposed tolls, and constantly invented new burdens only to gratify his haughty pride and love of display. On a little island between Bingen and Ruedesheim he caused a tower to be built, so that all passing ships could be stopped in the narrow passage and forced to pay toll.

Soon after the building of this custom-house, there was a very bad harvest in the country around Mayence. Drought had parched the fields, and what little seed remaining had been destroyed by hail. The shortage was felt all the more, because Bishop Hatto had bought up all the corn still left from the year before and stored it up safely in his granaries.

A terrible famine now threatened the land, spreading misery among the poor, and the hapless people implored the cruel bishop to lower the price of the

corn in his store-houses, which was sold at such exorbitant prices that his subjects could not buy it. All their petitions were in vain. Hatto’s advisers besought him to have pity on the poor, but the bishop remained unmoved.

One day a group of hungry beggars crowded around the episcopal palace crying for food, just as Hatto and his guests were sitting down for a luxurious banquet. The bishop expressed his opinion to the jolly company that these wretched people should be done away with altogether.

As the ragged mob of men, women, and children, with hollow cheeks and pale faces kept crying for bread, a fiendish plan took hold in the bishop’s brain. He stepped out on his balcony, waved to the people with hypocritical kindness, and promised them corn; they would be led outside the town to a barn where each one was to receive as much corn as he wished. The poor folk hurried forth, their hearts full of gratitude; but once they were all inside the barn, Hatto ordered the doors to be locked and the building to be set on fire.

The screams of the hapless wretches were heart-rending, and could be heard even in the bishop’s palace. But cruel Hatto called out scornfully to his advisers: “Listen, how the mice are squeaking in the corn. Their eternal begging has finally come to an end. May the mice bite me if it is not true!”

But God’s punishment was terrible. Thousands of mice swarmed out of the burning barn, streamed like a flowing river to the palace, filled every chamber and corner, and at last attacked the bishop himself. His servants killed the mice by the hundreds, but their numbers only increased, and so did their ferocity. The bishop, seized with horror, fled from the town and boarded a boat hoping to escape from his terrible pursuers. But the innumerable horde swam after him, and when he reached his custom-tower on the island, thinking that at last he would be safe, the mice followed him, gnawing the keep and tearing themselves an entrance with their sharp teeth, till at last they reached their quarry. The cruel bishop was eaten alive by the mice, and in his despair he offered his soul to the Evil One, if he would but release his body from this awful agony. The Evil Spirit came, freed Bishop Hatto’s body, but took his soul away for himself.

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Illustration by Oliver Ferreira