

STORYBOOK

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THE DANCING BEAR
Michael Morpurgo

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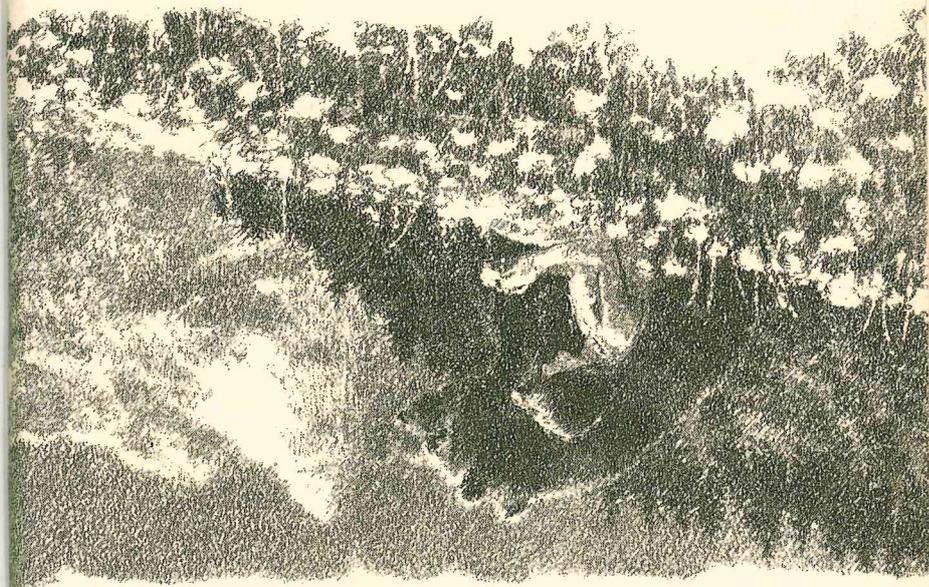
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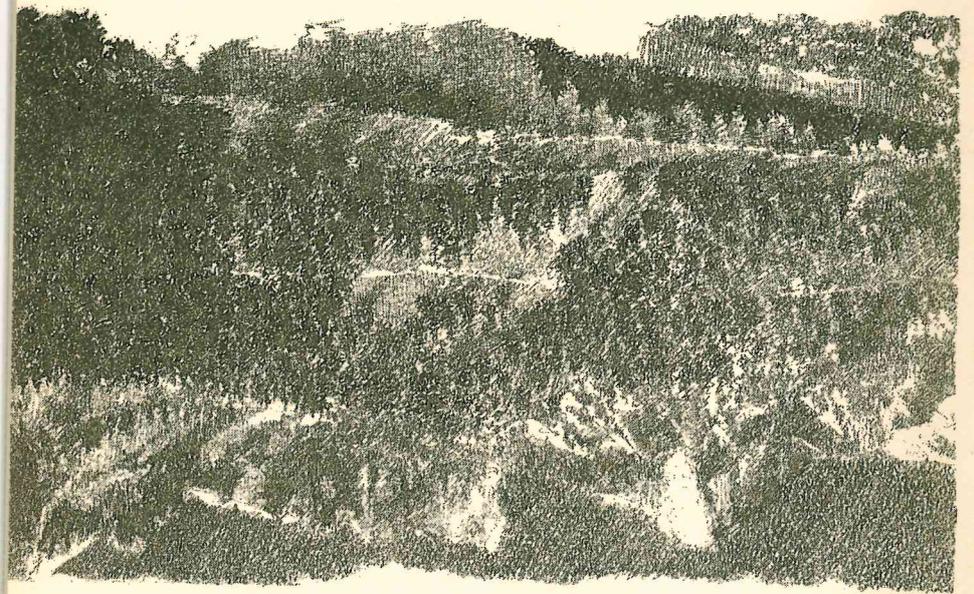
THE DANCING BEAR

Michael Morpurgo

Illustrated by Christian Birmingham

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For Gina and Murray, with thanks

complete happiness. with the eagles, is as close as I have been to in the mountains, and to hear its echo soaring and my music. To play my hunting horn high the school, content with my own company schoolmaster here. I live alone in a house by For nearly forty years now, I have been the

so I became a teacher instead. Shepherding wasn't ever going to be possible, three, an accident left me with a limp. his grandfather before him, but when I was I been a shepherd like my grandfather and ago than I like to remember. I was to have was born in this mountain village longer

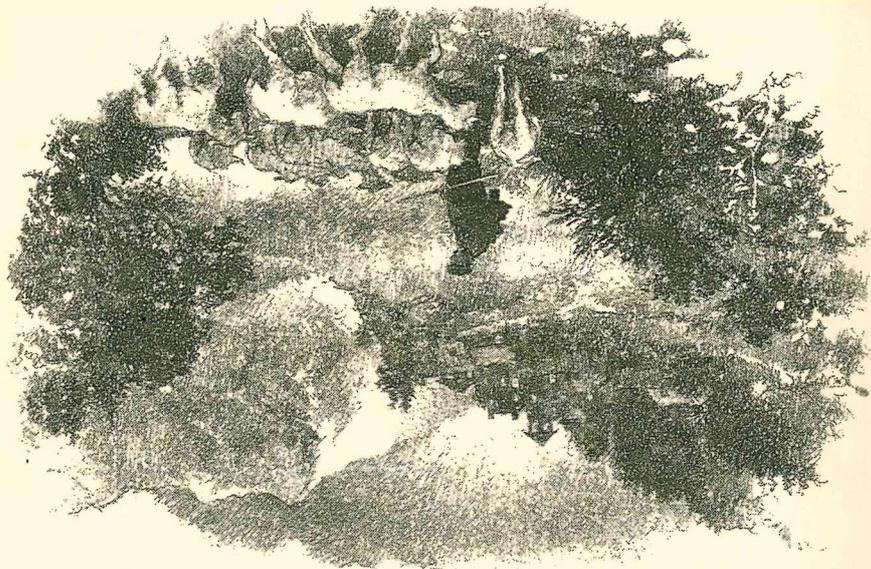
THE DANCING BEAR

Snow cuts us off for at least three months of every winter, sometimes more, and then we are horses and the pigs.

sweet summer grass. The cows go too, and the them up on to the mountain pastures for the village, but when the snows clear, they take sheep which they graze in the fields around the promise. Almost all the families have a flock of won't find a better cheese anywhere, that's a We make cheese here, sheep's cheese. You by the seasons, and above all by the mountains. We are people whose lives are ruled by sheep,

put up with that.

they think I'm not listening, but you have to "Three Legs" or "Long John Silver" when cruel from time to time. They call me should. Like all children, they can be a bit my horn and I talk to myself more than I school. They think I'm a bit eccentric - I play a kind of uncle to them even after they've left instead of sheep, that's all. I teach them, and I'm a sort of shepherd after all: I shepherd children Yet I suppose you could say that I became



left to ourselves. But it's a peaceful place at any
time of year. The winding road from the valley
ends in the village square. Beyond us are the
mountains, and beyond the mountains, the sky.
We are a world of our own and we like it that
way. We are used to it. The life is hard but
predictable. People are born, people die. We
have our blizzards and our droughts, no one
ever has enough money and the roof always
needs repairing.
Nothing ever really disturbed our life until
some ten years ago, when a small bear came
down out of the mountains. Nothing was ever
to be the same again.

The Dancing Bear

Roxanne was about seven years old at the time. An orphan child, she lived with her grandfather, who was a dour and unloving man. She was a solitary girl, but never lonely, I think. At school, she appeared to be a dreamer, a thinker. After school, with her grandfather busy in his fields, she would often wander off by herself, watching rabbits, maybe, or following butterflies. She was forever going missing. Then her grandfather would come shouting around the village for her. When he found her, he would shake her or even hit her. I protested more than once, but was told to mind my own business. A grandfather was interested in nothing unless there was some money in it. Roxanne was a nuisance to him. She knew it - and everyone knew it. But he was the only mother and father she had.

It was a Sunday morning in April. We were in the café before lunch. The old man was going on about Roxanne again, and how

she ate him out of house and home. He'd had a bit too much to drink, I think, but then he was often that way.

"Gone off again, she has," he grumbled. "God knows what she gets up to. Nothing but trouble, that girl!"

Just then we heard shouting in the village square and, glad of any diversion, we all went out to look. Roxanne was staggering towards us, clutching a bear cub in her arms, with its arms wrapped around her neck. She'd been scratched on her face and on her arms, but it didn't seem to bother her. She was laughing and breathless with joy.

"Bruno!" she said. "He's called Bruno. I was down by the stream. I was just throwing sticks and I felt something stroking my neck. I turned round and there he was. He patted my shoulder. He's my very own bear, Grandpa. He's all alone. He's hungry. I can keep him, can't I? Please?"

If we hadn't been there - and half the village was there by now - I think the old man might

have grabbed the bear cub by the scruff of the neck and taken him right back where he came from.

"Look at him," he said. "He's half starved. He's going to die anyway. And besides, bears are for killing, not keeping. You know how many sheep we lose every year to bears? Dozens, I'm telling you, dozens."

Some people were beginning to agree with him. I looked at Roxanne and saw she was looking up at me. Her eyes were filled with tears.

"Maybe" - I was still thinking hard as I spoke - "if you kept him, you know, just for a while. It wouldn't cost much: some waste milk and an old shed somewhere. And just suppose" - I was talking directly to the old man now - "just suppose you made 'bear' labels for your honey jars - you could call it 'Bruno's Honey'. Everyone would hear about it. They'd come from miles around, have a little look at the bear and then buy your honey. You'd make a fortune, I'm sure of it."

I'd said the right thing. Roxanne's grandfather had his beehives all over the mountainside, and everyone knew that he couldn't sell even half the honey he collected. He nodded slowly as the sense of it dawned on him. "All right," he said. "We'll try it. Just for a while, mind."

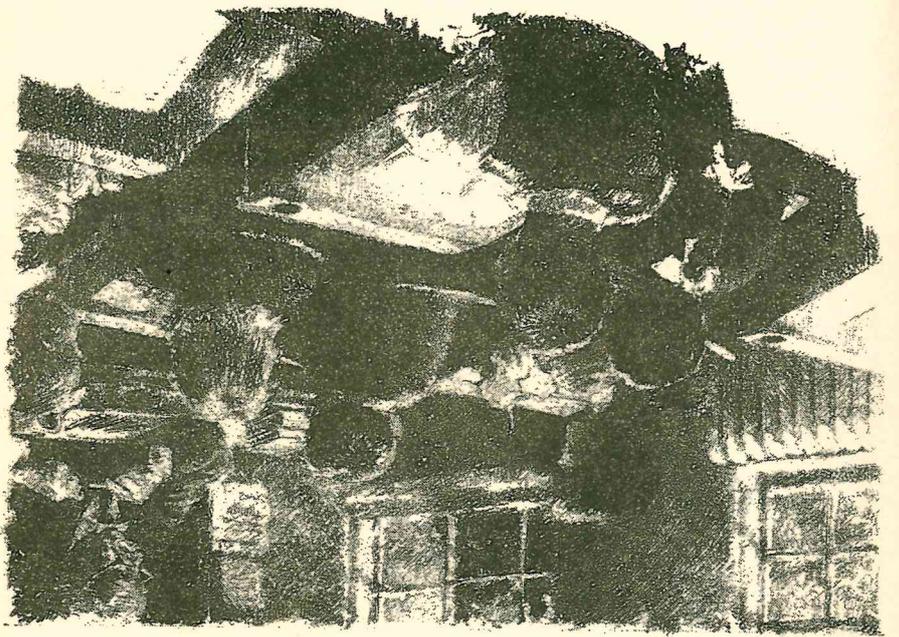


Roxanne looked at me and beamed her thanks. She went off with Bruno, followed by an excited cavalcade of village children who took turns to carry him.

That afternoon, they made him a bed of bracken at the back of one of the old man's barns, and fed him a supper of warm ewe's milk from a bottle. They dipped his paw in honey and made him suck it. After that he helped himself. Later when I passed by the barn on my evening walk, I heard Roxanne singing him to sleep. She sang quite beautifully.

In no time at all, Bruno became one of the village children; nobody was afraid of him, as he was always gentle and biddable. He'd go splashing with them in the streams; he'd romp with them in the hay barns; he'd curl himself up in a ball and roll with them helter-skelter down the hillsides. He was more than a playmate, though. He was our mascot, the pride of the village.

To begin with, he never strayed far from Roxanne. He would follow her everywhere,



almost as if he were guarding her. Then one day - and by this time, Roxanne was maybe ten or eleven - he broke out of his barn and followed her to school.

I was sitting at my desk sharpening pencils and the class was settled at its work, when Bruno's great panting face appeared at the window, tongue lolling out and drooling. Roxanne managed to shut him in the woodshed where he stayed till lunch, happily sharpening his claws on the logs.

Not much school-work was done *that* day.

After that Bruno was forever escaping from his barn and turning over the dustbins in the village. He liked dustbins.

But as the bear grew bigger and stronger, there were those in the village who began to worry - and I was one of them. He went

walkabout again not long afterwards, and all the children were out looking for him. Tiny - the smallest boy in the school - came upon Bruno outside the village shop, his head in the dustbin.

Tiny called, and Roxanne and the others came running. By the time they arrived, Bruno was up on his back legs and Tiny was tickling his tummy. Bruno swiped playfully at Tiny but it was enough to send him reeling backwards, hitting his head on a wall as he fell. The cut needed eight stitches. Roxanne swore it wasn't Bruno's fault, that it was just an accident. So did Tiny, so did they all.

That evening there was a village meeting in the café. Everyone who spoke up was adamant. Tiny's mother was furious: Bruno would have to go to a zoo. It was just too risky to keep

him. Even Roxanne's grandfather agreed, and no one had expected *that*. We all knew how well he was doing out of his "Bruno's Honey".

"Honey's one thing," he said, "but a bear like that is worth a lot of money to a zoo. And he's my bear, remember?"

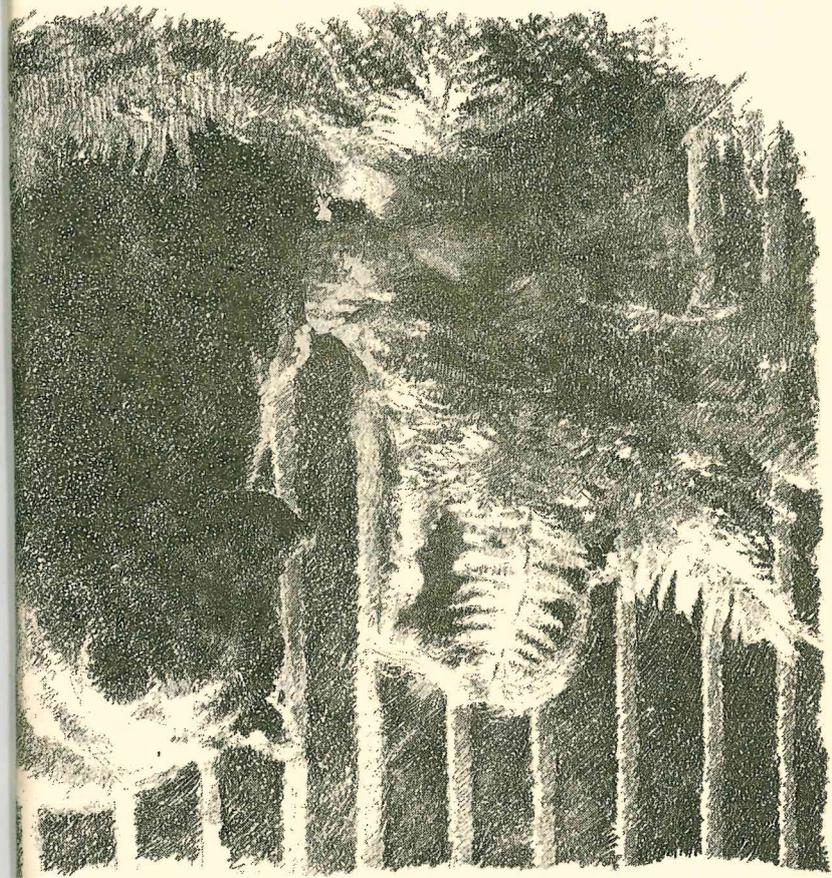
Suddenly Roxanne was on her feet.

"NO!" she cried. "You can't!" And she looked to me again, just as she had done all those years before.

This time there was no help I could offer her. I turned away.

"I'll look after him," she pleaded. "Honest I will. We could build a proper cage somewhere. And I won't let him out unless I'm with him. He won't hurt anyone ever again, I promise."

She spoke as if her life depended on it, and we listened. To this day, I don't know how she did it, but within minutes we were all discussing how the cage was to be paid for. Perhaps it was because everyone trusted Roxanne and liked her. She was in some way a



child of the village, everyone's child; we had all seen how well she handled Bruno, how she'd sing to him to calm him and how he'd listen mesmerized, how he'd follow her everywhere adoringly. Or perhaps it was because no one liked the idea of the old man selling Bruno and pocketing the cash. Anyhow, Bruno stayed.

The cage was built in the village square and Bruno moved in. Roxanne looked after him as she had promised.

Every day, she laid fresh bracken in his den at the back of the cage, and gave him fresh water, fresh vegetables and fresh fish. I would help her catch trout in the stream and the vegetables were supplied from all over the village.

Then someone wrote an article about Bruno in a local newspaper and there was a piece on the radio. People flocked to the village to see the bear, and the old man's honey sold out in a few weeks. He bought more hives. After that there was never another mention of selling Bruno. He had a notice put up on the cage door, with a large collection box underneath:

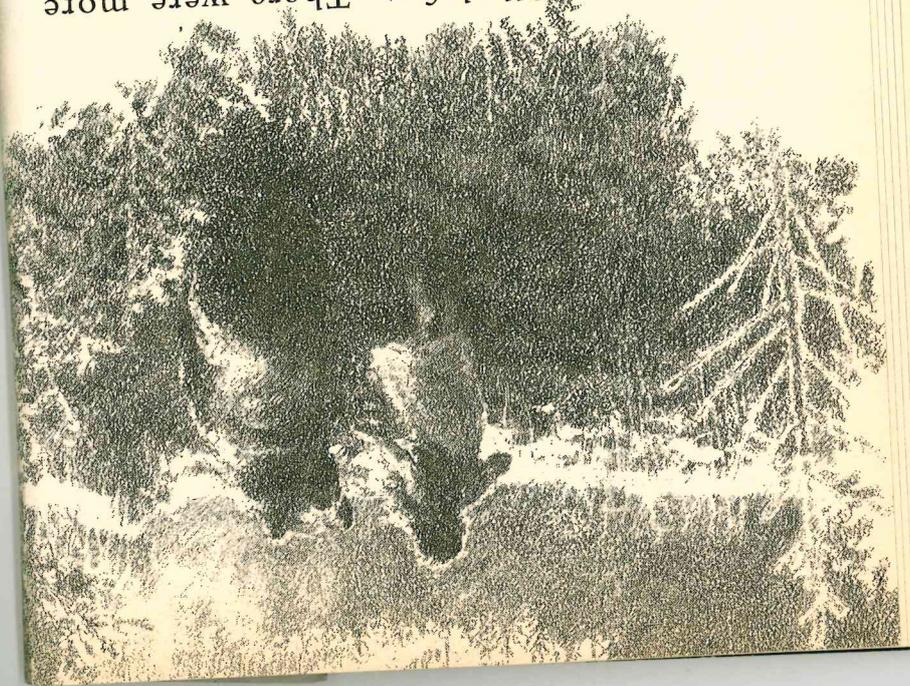
Bruno

European Bear

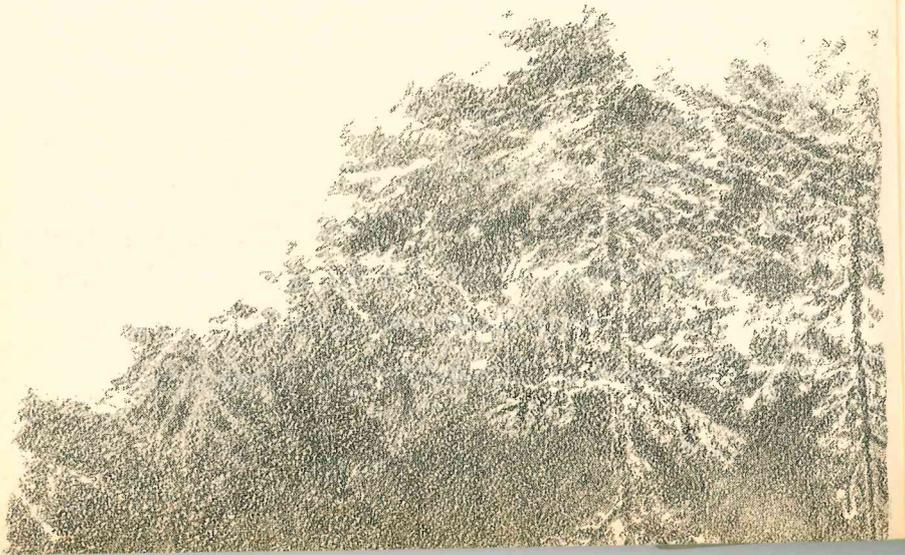
Help Save Threatened Species
Donations in the box please.

would run together across the fields. she would let him out of his cage and they for the moment after school each day, when long as Bruno was happy, she was too. She lived Roxanne took no notice of any of this. So was raking in the money.

blue or bear-brown. Roxanne's grandfather "Bruno Teddy Bears" in rose-pink, lavender- "Bruno's Jam", "Bruno's Beeswax", even wasn't just honey they could buy: there was television. People came in droves. Now it newspaper articles and a programme on the The box filled fast. There were more



Often I saw them sitting together on a hillside. She'd be talking to him or singing to him, and when she sang now, she shamed even the skylarks to silence. Roxanne sang as I hope I saw less of her these days. She was no longer a girl, but a young woman. She had long since left the village school for the big school in the valley. But somehow I had become her "bear-sitter". If she couldn't be there to feed Bruno, she would ask me to do it. It wasn't often and I felt honoured to be so trusted.



Bruno was always anxious when she was away. I would sing to him softly as she did, and in spite of my crusty old voice, it seemed to calm him a little. But he would always pace up and down when I left and refuse to settle until Roxanne returned.

It was at the Spring Council Meeting last year that the Mayor read out the letter. A film company, who called themselves "Wonderment Films", had written to us. The village, they said, was an ideal location for their film. They had heard about Bruno and would want to use him too. They would need accommodation for the film crew for a few days and they would need the people of the village as extras. They would need transport, they would need food. Just what sort of a film it was going to be wasn't explained.

Most of us were quick to agree to it. After all, there would be money in it for everyone. There was even talk of actually "starting" in the film. Monsieur D'Arblay, the Mayor, said

he'd done a bit of acting in his day.

"Of course, it was some time ago," he said, "but it's like riding a bicycle. Once learned, never forgotten. Let them come. That's what I say!"

Everyone agreed. A letter was written and sent. The village hummed with anticipation.

The Mayor did his best to ensure the benefits would be shared. No one was allowed to rent out more than one room, and the hire of tractors, trailers, porters and guides was spread around the village as fairly as possible. Even so, there were already rumblings that some were going to do better out of the film than others. Everyone knew that. Roxanne's grandfather would be getting the lion's share - or rather the bear's share.

Roxanne, like all the young people in the village, could think of little else but the arrival of the film crew. In school the children were as high as kites and quite impossible to teach. When the film crew arrived at last, late one afternoon, they were not at all as any of

in our remote valley, television and radio Michael. The whole world knew Niki. Even Elvis was Elvis and George Michael was George at once, even me. Niki was just Niki, as said, "Niki who?" because everyone knew him through the village like wildfire. No one it's Niki, Niki, Niki, Niki." The name spread someone else, louder this time. "That's Niki. "Niki," someone whispered, and then taken Bruno for his walk.

looking at the cage. It was empty. Roxanne had, "Where's the bear, then?" he demanded,

recognised.
 man who stood stretching in the village square. He spoke - and it was a voice we all At first no one noticed the slight young stared wide-eyed.

and one glorious purple fedora hat. We all the rainbow, lime-green shoes, pink trousers - clothes...! Bright and gaudy, coats all colours of with all sorts of high-tech equipment. But their square, dusty, tousled and tired, and laden down us had imagined. They stood in the village

had beamed his face and his voice into every household. We couldn't take our eyes off him. That voice, that face, had suddenly become flesh.

"Where's the bear?" he said again, and at that moment Roxanne came into the square, with Bruno ambling along behind her. Bruno saw the film crew and reared up on his hind legs. They backed away. From a safe distance, Niki looked Bruno up and down. "Can he dance?" he said.

Roxanne was speechless. Like the rest of us, she could not believe that Niki was standing there in front of her - and actually *talking* to her.

"Dance," said Niki, again. "Can he dance? I need a dancing bear."

"Oh, he'll dance all right," said Roxanne's grandfather, rubbing his hands. "That bear can do anything you ask, can't he, Roxanne?"

Roxanne said nothing. She didn't need to. The anger in her eyes said it all.



1875

Later that evening, we all discovered what sort of a film it was going to be. I was a little disappointed. I had had visions of some great and glamorous epic in period costume, with a battle or two; or perhaps a musical extravaganza where world-famous stars would caper through meadows and up mountainsides - *our* meadows and *our* mountainsides.

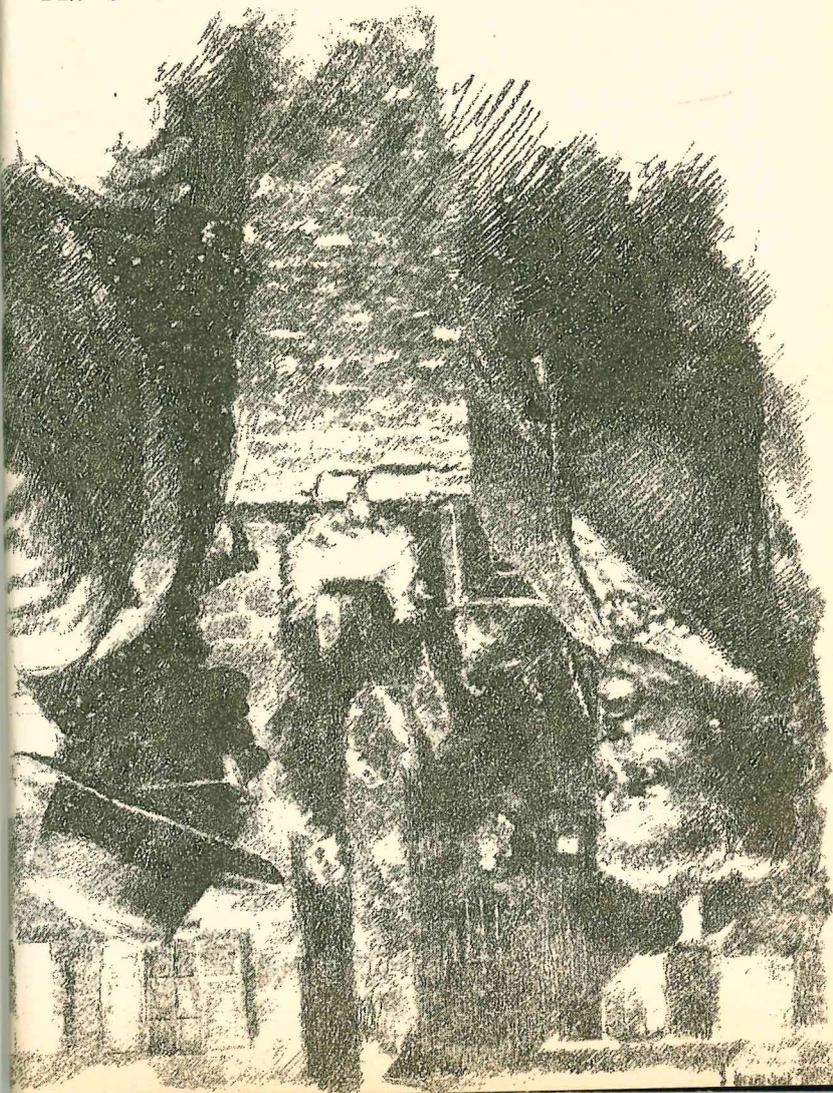
The Director, who turned out to be the one with the purple fedora hat, was quick to dispel such hopes. They were making a short video to accompany Niki's latest pop song, which was to be called, "Follow Me". This was greeted with screams of delight by the children (who were becoming wilder by the minute).

And, the Director went on, they would need actors - all the children he could find.

And they wanted rats.

"Rats!" Madame D'Arblay protested indignantly. "We do *not* have any rats here."

“You soon will,” the Director laughed. “You soon will.”
I rather liked him, or maybe it was just his wonderful hat.



"Auditions will be held in the morning. We'll be needing grown-ups for the Mayor and Corporation. Nine o'clock in the square."

Madame D'Arblay went off home at once, swearing that no child of hers would be playing a rat. Not for Niki, not for all the tea in China.

It didn't take a genius to work out that with a Mayor, Corporation and all those rats, the film was going to be something to do with the Pied Piper of Hamelin. As I lay in my bed that night, I dared to hope that I wasn't too old to play the Piper himself. I could play the flute a little, or maybe they'd even let me play my horn.

In the cold light of the following morning, the children lined up for auditions in the square. Every child in the village had volunteered. I was proud of that. I hoped Madame D'Arblay's boy would be chosen as a rat: I loved to see Madame D'Arblay angry. She had several chins and they all wobbled when she was cross.

Bruno sat and watched from his cage. I could see he was agitated.

Young or old, they all wanted to be rats. Unfortunately, was Madame D'Arblay's boy, and Roxanne was not among those chosen nor,

Rat. Rat. Rat."

chosen rats as he went: "You're a rat. A rat. passed along the line again, picking out his brief whispered discussion, the Director to consider each one closely. Then, after a liking) inspected the line of children, stopping purple fedora hat rather too flamboyantly for my Niki and the Director (who brandished that looked wonderful.

wanted to be rats. The whiskered costumes, Most of the children, including Roxanne,

