

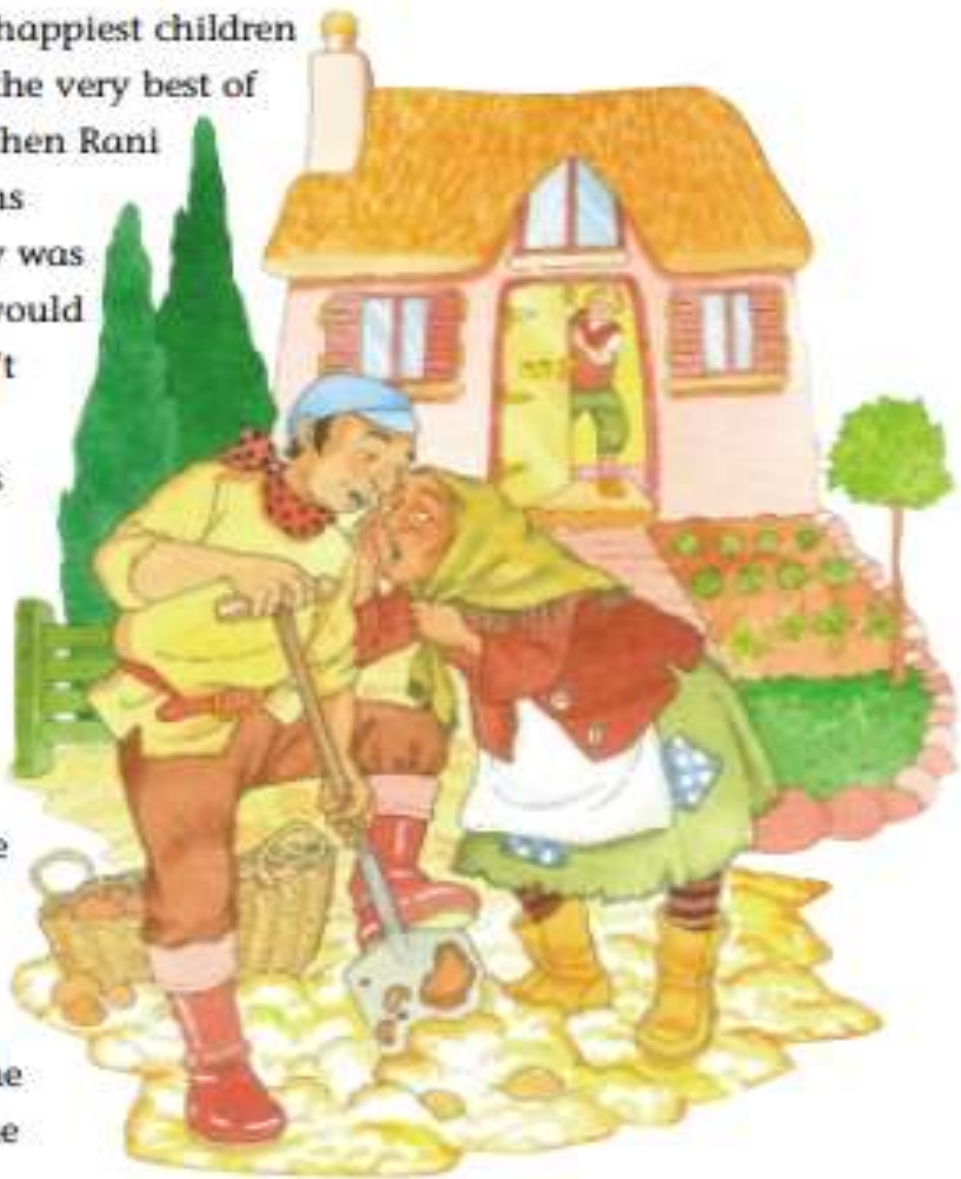
The story



Once upon a time, everybody in the world was friends with everybody. Nobody hurt or upset anybody and nobody ever said or did a mean thing. The secret of this happy world was that the people were always giving friendship tokens to each other. They were kind to everyone and wanted to make everyone feel good. Because they gave away so many friendship tokens, there were always more and more of them. It was like magic and it was a very good world to be in.

Rani and Leroy were two of the happiest children in this happy world. They were the very best of friends and always had been. When Rani was sad, Leroy's friendship tokens would cheer her up. When Leroy was upset, Rani's friendship tokens would make him feel better. They didn't always agree, but when they disagreed their friendship tokens meant that they tried to understand each other instead of falling out.

One day an old woman came into the world. She looked around at the happy faces of the people and her mean face grew even meaner. She felt different from them, uncomfortable and miserable. She wanted to stop the people being so happy and make



them as miserable as she was. She crept up to the first person she saw. He was giving some friendship tokens to his neighbour by helping him to dig his garden.

She whispered in the man's ear: 'Don't give any more of your friendship tokens away. That other man will keep on taking them from you until you have none left. Keep your tokens for yourself.' The man immediately stopped helping his neighbour. 'You can dig the garden yourself,' he said. 'You're not having my friendship tokens.' And he went inside his house and shut the door tight.

Everywhere the old woman went, she whispered the same thing in people's ears. 'Don't give away your friendship tokens. Keep them for yourself.' And gradually the people stopped being kind and friendly to each other and instead became selfish and suspicious. And because they didn't give away their friendship tokens, each day there were fewer and fewer tokens to be seen.



At last the old woman came to where Rani and Leroy were playing. They were giving each other lots of friendship tokens. Rani was telling Leroy what a brilliant runner he was. Leroy was telling Rani how amazing she was at swimming.

The old woman's face twisted with anger. She sidled up to Leroy and hissed in his ear: 'Don't give Rani any more friendship tokens. She wants them all so that you won't have any. You must keep them all for yourself.'

Leroy looked at Rani's happy face but, suddenly, all he could see was greed. She gave him some friendship tokens but he would not take them. He would not listen. He felt suddenly angry with her. His face grew hot and his mouth was dry. 'I know you just want to take all my friendship tokens so you can keep them for yourself,' he said. 'You get away from me, you thief.' He clenched his fists.

Rani was hurt and bewildered. She went to him and put her hand on his arm. But Leroy pushed her away. 'Get away from me,' he shouted. 'I tell you you're not having my friendship tokens – I will never be your friend again.' And he turned away and shut himself inside his house.

Rani did not understand. Leroy was her oldest and best friend. What was happening? Then she looked at the old woman. The woman's face was gleeful and she was rubbing her hands. As she walked away, Rani followed her. Everywhere the old woman went Rani saw her whispering to the people so that they turned away from each other. Rani gave the people her friendship tokens, but they just looked at her suspiciously and told her to go away. At last Rani realised that the old woman was destroying all the kindness in the world with her whispering and that she had destroyed Rani's friendship with Leroy.

Then the old woman turned around and saw Rani, and saw that she was still full of friendship tokens. The old woman walked towards her. Rani was scared but she did not run away. Instead, she looked closely at the old woman's face and saw that, under the meanness, she was the loneliest, saddest person she had ever seen.



So, Rani gave her a friendship token. 'I am sorry you are such a lonely old woman,' she said. 'I will be your friend.' But the old woman did not hear her. She came closer. 'I will be your friend,' said Rani, more loudly, but the old woman had been lonely and miserable for such a long time, she still could not hear the kind words. She leaned closely towards Rani's ear and began to whisper.

By now Rani was terrified that the old woman would destroy her friendship tokens just as she had destroyed Leroy's and all the other people's. She tried one last time.

'I will be your friend,' she said, and to her amazement her voice sounded so loud, it was as if many, many children had spoken.

The old woman stopped and looked around her as if she had just woken from sleep.

'What did you say?' she said.

'I will be your friend,' said Rani. As the old woman heard Rani's words it was as though she had been given the friendship tokens of many, many children. Her face crumpled and tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks. And then Rani gave her token after token. 'I will stop you being lonely,' she said. 'I know you won't hurt the people any more. I believe you are really a kind old woman.'

And as she spoke the old woman cried and cried, but all she could say was: 'It's too late. It's too late.'

'No!' cried Rani, 'It can't be too late. We must go and find Leroy.'

So Rani and the old woman ran to Leroy's house. He was still angry. He still thought that Rani wanted to steal his friendship tokens. 'I will never trust her again,' he said.



But the old woman whispered to him and, this time, her words helped to calm him down. She told him that Rani had never wanted to steal his friendship tokens, it had all been her fault. She said that he should let Rani talk to him. And, of course, the more Leroy listened to Rani and the more friendship tokens she gave him, the more tokens he had to give back to her. At last he told her he was sorry and ashamed that he had been so angry and had not listened to her. He said that she would always be his best friend. Rani said that he would always be hers.

So, Rani and Leroy's story has a happy ending, because they were able to listen to each other and realise why things had gone wrong. They were soon giving each other as many friendship tokens as ever, and they were friends for as long as they lived.

As for the old woman, she walked across the whole world, trying to undo all the sadness and misery she had caused, but, she was right, it was too late. Everywhere people hurt each other and fought each other, even whole countries fought each other. But she kept on trying to make things better. She still does. You can't see her but she still walks the world trying to help people to give their friendship tokens away. Sometimes they listen and sometimes they don't. Are you listening?