The Pied Piper of Hamelin

by Robert Browning

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The Pied Piper

of

Hamelin

THE PIED PIPER

OF

HAMELIN

BY

ROBERT BROWNING

ILLUSTRATED BY

KATE GREENAWAY

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THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN

[Listen]

I.

Hamelin Town's in Brunswick, By famous Hanover city; The river Weser, deep and wide, Washes its wall on the southern side; A pleasanter spot you never spied; But, when begins my ditty, Almost five hundred years ago, To see the townsfolk suffer so From vermin, was a pity.

[Listen]

II.

Rats! They fought the dogs and killed the cats, And bit the babies in the cradles,

And ate the cheeses out of the vats.

And licked the soup from the cook's own ladles,

Split open the kegs of salted sprats, Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,

And even spoiled the women's chats,

By drowning their speaking With shrieking and squeaking In fifty different sharps and flats.

[Listen]

III.

At last the people in a body To the Town Hall came flocking: "Tis clear," cried they, "our Mayor's a noddy; And as for our Corporation—shocking To think we buy gowns lined with ermine For dolts that can't or won't determine What's best to rid us of our vermin! You hope, because you're old and obese, To find in the furry civic robe ease? Rouse up, sirs! Give your brains a racking To find the remedy we're lacking, Or, sure as fate, we'll send you packing!" At this the Mayor and Corporation Quaked with a mighty consternation.

[Listen]

IV.

An hour they sate in council, At length the Mayor broke silence: "For a guilder I'd my ermine gown sell; I wish I were a mile hence! It's easy to bid one rack one's brain— I'm sure my poor head aches again, I've scratched it so, and all in vain Oh for a trap, a trap, a trap!" Just as he said this, what should hap At the chamber door but a gentle tap? "Bless us," cried the Mayor, "what's that?" (With the Corporation as he sat, Looking little though wondrous fat; Nor brighter was his eye, nor moister

Than a too-long-opened oyster, Save when at noon his paunch grew mutinous For a plate of turtle green and glutinous) "Only a scraping of shoes on the mat? Anything like the sound of a rat Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!"

[Listen]

V.

"Come in!"—the Mayor cried, looking bigger: And in did come the strangest figure! His queer long coat from heel to head Was half of yellow and half of red, And he himself was tall and thin, With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin, And light loose hair, yet swarthy skin No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin, But lips where smile went out and in; There was no guessing his kith and kin: And nobody could enough admire The tall man and his quaint attire. Quoth one: "It's as my great-grandsire, Starting up at the Trump of Doom's tone, Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!"

[Listen]

VI.

He advanced to the council-table: And, "Please your honours," said he, "I'm able, By means of a secret charm, to draw All creatures living beneath the sun, That creep or swim or fly or run, After me so as you never saw! And I chiefly use my charm On creatures that do people harm, The mole and toad and newt and viper; And people call me the Pied Piper." (And here they noticed round his neck A scarf of red and yellow stripe, To match with his coat of the self-same cheque;

And at the scarf's end hung a pipe; And his fingers they noticed were ever straying As if impatient to be playing Upon his pipe, as low it dangled Over his vesture so old-fangled.)

"Yet," said he, "poor Piper as I am, In Tartary I freed the Cham, Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats, I eased in Asia the Nizam Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats: And as for what your brain bewilders, If I can rid your town of rats

Will you give me a thousand guilders?" "One? fifty thousand!"—was the exclamation Of the astonished Mayor and Corporation.

[Listen]

VII.

Into the street the Piper stept, Smiling first a little smile, As if he knew what magic slept In his quiet pipe the while; Then, like a musical adept, To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled, And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled, Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled; And ere three shrill notes the pipe uttered, You heard as if an army muttered;

And the muttering grew to a grumbling; And the grumbling grew to a mighty rumbling; And out of the houses the rats came tumbling. Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats, Brown rats, black rats, grey rats, tawny rats, Grave old plodders, gay young friskers, Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins, Cocking tails and pricking whiskers, Families by tens and dozens, Brothers, sisters, husbands, wives— Followed the Piper for their lives. From street to street he piped advancing, And step for step they followed dancing, Until they came to the river Weser Wherein all plunged and perished! —Save one who, stout as Julius Cæsar, Swam across and lived to carry (As he, the manuscript he cherished) To Rat-land home his commentary: Which was, "At the first shrill notes of the pipe, I heard a sound as of scraping tripe, And putting apples, wondrous ripe, Into a cider-press's gripe: And a moving away of pickle-tub-boards, And a leaving ajar of conserve-cupboards, And a drawing the corks of train-oil-flasks, And a breaking the hoops of butter-casks: And it seemed as if a voice (Sweeter far than by harp or by psaltery Is breathed) called out, 'Oh rats, rejoice! The world is grown to one vast drysaltery! So munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon, Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!' And just as a bulky sugar-puncheon, All ready staved, like a great sun shone Glorious scarce an inch before me, Just as methought it said, 'Come, bore me!' —I found the Weser

rolling o'er me."

[Listen]

VIII.

You should have heard the Hamelin people Ringing the bells till they rocked the steeple "Go," cried the Mayor, "and get long poles, Poke out the nests and block up the holes!

Consult with carpenters and builders, And leave in our town not even a trace Of the rats!"—when suddenly up the face Of the Piper perked in the market-place, With a, "First, if you please, my thousand guilders!"

[Listen]

IX.

A thousand guilders! The Mayor looked blue; So did the Corporation too. For council dinners made rare havoc With Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock; And half the money would replenish Their cellar's biggest butt with Rhenish. To pay this sum to a wandering fellow With a gipsy coat of red and yellow! "Beside," quoth the Mayor with a knowing wink, "Our business was done at the river's brink; We saw with our eyes the vermin sink, And what's dead can't come to life, I think. So, friend, we're not the folks to shrink From the duty of giving you something to drink, And a matter of money to put in your poke; But as for the guilders, what we spoke Of them, as you very well know, was in joke. Beside, our losses have made us thrifty. A thousand guilders! Come, take fifty!"

[Listen]

X.

The Piper's face fell, and he cried, "No trifling! I can't wait, beside! I've promised to visit by dinner-time Bagdad, and accept the prime Of the Head-Cook's pottage, all

he's rich in, For having left, in the Caliph's kitchen, Of a nest of scorpions no survivor: With him I proved no bargain-driver, With you, don't think I'll bate a stiver! And folks who put me in a passion May find me pipe after another fashion."

[Listen]

XI.

"How?" cried the Mayor, "d' ye think I brook Being worse treated than a Cook? Insulted by a lazy ribald With idle pipe and vesture piebald? You threaten us, fellow? Do your worst, Blow your pipe there till you burst!"

[Listen]

XII.

Once more he stept into the street, And to his lips again Laid his long pipe of smooth straight cane;

And ere he blew three notes

(such sweet Soft notes as yet musician's cunning Never gave the enraptured air)

There was a rustling,

that seemed like a bustling

Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,

Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,

Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering,

And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering,

Out came the children running.

All the little boys and girls,

With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,

And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls.

Tripping

and skipping,

ran merrily after

The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.

[Listen]

XIII.

The Mayor was dumb, and the Council stood As if they were changed into blocks of wood, Unable to move a step, or cry To the children merrily skipping by. —Could only follow with the eye That joyous crowd at the Piper's back. But how the Mayor was on the rack, And the wretched Council's bosoms beat, As the Piper turned from the High Street To where the Weser rolled its waters Right in the way of their sons and daughters! However he turned from South to West, And to Koppelberg Hill his steps addressed, And after him the children pressed; Great was the joy in every breast. "He never can cross that mighty top! He's forced to let the piping drop, And we shall see our children stop!" When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side, A wondrous portal opened wide, As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed; And the Piper advanced and the children followed, And when all were in to the very last, The door in the mountain side shut fast. Did I say, all? No; One was lame, And could not dance the whole of the way; And in after years, if you would blame His sadness, he was used to say,— "It's dull in our town since my playmates left! I can't forget that I'm bereft Of all the pleasant sights they see, Which the Piper also promised me. For he led us, he said, to a joyous land, Joining the town and just at hand,

Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew, And flowers put forth a fairer hue, And everything was strange and new; The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here, And their dogs outran our fallow deer, And honey-bees had lost their stings, And horses were born with eagles' wings; And just as I became assured My lame foot

would be speedily cured, The music stopped and I stood still, And found myself outside the hill, Left alone against my will, To go now limping as before, And never hear of that country more!"

[Listen]

XIV.

Alas, alas for Hamelin! There came into many a burgher's pate A text which says that Heaven's gate Opes to the rich at as easy rate As the needle's eye takes a camel in! The Mayor sent East, West, North, and South, To offer the Piper, by word of mouth, Wherever it was men's lot to find him, Silver and gold to his heart's content, If he'd only return the way he went, And bring the children behind him. But when they saw 'twas a lost endeavour, And Piper and dancers were gone for ever, They made a decree that lawyers never Should think their records dated duly If, after the day of the month and year, These words did not as well appear, "And so long after what happened here On the Twenty-second of July, Thirteen hundred and seventy-six:" And the better in memory to fix The place of the children's last retreat, They called it, the Pied Piper's Street— Where any one playing on pipe or tabor, Was sure for the future to lose his labour. Nor suffered they hostelry or tavern To shock with mirth a street so solemn; But opposite the place of the cavern They wrote the story on a column, And on the great church-window painted The same, to make the world acquainted How their children were stolen away, And there it stands to this very day. And I must not omit to say That in Transylvania there's a tribe Of alien people that ascribe The outlandish ways and dress On which their neighbours lay such stress, To their fathers and mothers having risen Out of some subterraneous prison Into which they were trepanned Long time ago in a mighty band Out of Hamelin town in Brunswick land, But how or why, they don't understand.

[Listen]

XV.

So, Willy, let me and you be wipers Of scores out with all men—especially pipers! And, whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice, If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise!

First published 1888 Original wood block designs engraved by Edward Evans Limited

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