

Robert Browning, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" [excerpts]



Illustrations by Kate Greenaway, engraved in col.
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see <https://archive.org/details/ThePiedPiperOfHamelin>

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.

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 cooks' 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.

[...]

VI

He advanced to the council-table:
And, "Please your honors," 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 check;
And at the scarf's end hung a pipe;
And his fingers, they noticed, were ever straying
As if impatient to be playing
Upon this 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 swarm 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.

[...]

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, gray 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 Caesar,

Swam across and lived to carry
 (As 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 dry-saltery!
 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."

[...] **nuncheon*, small meal usu.
 bread, cheese & beer (arch.)

X

The Piper's face fell, and he cried,
 "No trifling! I can't wait! Beside,
 I've promised to visit by dinnertime
 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 to another fashion."

[...]

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—
 And 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!

XIV

Alas, alas for Hamelin!
 There came into many a burgher's pate
 A text which says that heaven's gate
 Opens 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.

[...]