

THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN

By: Robert Browning



I.

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

II.

10 Rats!
11 They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
12 And bit the babies in the cradles,
13 And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
14 And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
15 Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
16 Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
17 And even spoiled the women's chats,
18 By drowning their speaking
19 With shrieking and squeaking
20 In fifty different sharps and flats.



III.

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



IV.

35 An hour they sat in council,
36 At length the Mayor broke silence:
37 ``For a guilder I'd my ermine gown sell;
38 ``I wish I were a mile hence!
39 ``It's easy to bid one rack one's brain --
40 ``I'm sure my poor head aches again,
41 ``I've scratched it so, and all in vain
42 ``Oh for a trap, a trap, a trap!"
43 Just as he said this, what should hap
44 At the chamber door but a gentle tap?
45 ``Bless us," cried the Mayor, ``what's that?"
46 (With the Corporation as he sat,
47 Looking little though wondrous fat;
48 Nor brighter was his eye, nor moister
49 Than a too-long-opened oyster,
50 Save when at noon his paunch grew mutinous
51 For a plate of turtle green and glutinous)
52 `Only a scraping of shoes on the mat?
53 ``Anything like the sound of a rat
54 ``Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!"

V.

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

VI.

70 He advanced to the council-table:
71 And, ``Please your honours," said he, ``I'm able,
72 ``By means of a secret charm, to draw
73 ``All creatures living beneath the sun,
74 ``That creep or swim or fly or run,
75 ``After me so as you never saw!
76 ``And I chiefly use my charm
77 ``On creatures that do people harm,
78 ``The mole and toad and newt and viper;
79 ``And people call me the Pied Piper."
80 (And here they noticed round his neck
81 A scarf of red and yellow stripe,
82 To match with his coat of the self-same cheque;
83 And at the scarf's end hung a pipe;
84 And his fingers, they noticed, were ever straying
85 As if impatient to be playing
86 Upon this pipe, as low it dangled
87 Over his vesture so old-fangled.)
88 ``Yet," said he, ``poor piper as I am,

89 ``In Tartary I freed the Cham,
90 ``Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats,
91 ``I eased in Asia the Nizam
92 ``Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats:
93 ``And as for what your brain bewilders,
94 ``If I can rid your town of rats
95 ``Will you give me a thousand guilders?"
96 ``One? fifty thousand!" -- was the exclamation
97 Of the astonished Mayor and Corporation.

VII.

98 Into the street the Piper stept,
99 Smiling first a little smile,
100 As if he knew what magic slept
101 In his quiet pipe the while;
102 Then, like a musical adept,
103 To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled,
104 And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled,
105 Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled;
106 And ere three shrill notes the pipe uttered,
107 You heard as if an army muttered;
108 And the muttering grew to a grumbling;
109 And the grumbling grew to a mighty rumbling;
110 And out of the houses the rats came tumbling.
111 Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
112 Brown rats, black rats, grey rats, tawny rats,
113 Grave old plodders, gay young friskers,
114 Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins,
115 Cocking tails and pricking whiskers,
116 Families by tens and dozens,
117 Brothers, sisters, husbands, wives --
118 Followed the Piper for their lives.
119 From street to street he piped advancing,
120 And step for step they followed dancing,
121 Until they came to the river Weser
122 Wherein all plunged and perished!
123 -- Save one who, stout as Julius Caesar,

124 Swam across and lived to carry
125 (As he, the manuscript he cherished)
126 To Rat-land home his commentary:
127 Which was, ``At the first shrill notes of the pipe,
128 ``I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,
129 ``And putting apples, wondrous ripe,
130 ``Into a cider-press's gripe:
131 ``And a moving away of pickle-tub-boards,
132 ``And a leaving ajar of conserve-cupboards,
133 ``And a drawing the corks of train-oil-flasks,
134 ``And a breaking the hoops of butter-casks:
135 ``And it seemed as if a voice
136 `` (Sweeter far than by harp or by psaltery
137 `` Is breathed) called out, `Oh rats, rejoice!
138 ```The world is grown to one vast drysaltery!
139 ```So munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon,
140 ```Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!
141 ``And just as a bulky sugar-puncheon,
142 ``All ready staved, like a great sun shone
143 ``Glorious scarce an inch before me,
144 ``Just as methought it said, `Come, bore me!
145 `` -- I found the Weser rolling o'er me."

VIII.

146 You should have heard the Hamelin people
147 Ringing the bells till they rocked the steeple
148 ``Go," cried the Mayor, ``and get long poles,
149 ``Poke out the nests and block up the holes!
150 ``Consult with carpenters and builders,
151 ``And leave in our town not even a trace
152 ``Of the rats!" -- when suddenly, up the face
153 Of the Piper perked in the market-place,
154 With a, ``First, if you please, my thousand guilders!"

IX.

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

X.

174 The Piper's face fell, and he cried,
175 "No trifling! I can't wait, beside!
176 "I've promised to visit by dinner-time
177 "Bagdad, and accept the prime
178 "Of the Head-Cook's pottage, all he's rich in,
179 "For having left, in the Caliph's kitchen,
180 "Of a nest of scorpions no survivor:
181 "With him I proved no bargain-driver,
182 "With you, don't think I'll bate a stiver!
183 "And folks who put me in a passion
184 "May find me pipe after another fashion."

XI.

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

XII.

191 Once more he stept into the street,
192 And to his lips again
193 Laid his long pipe of smooth straight cane;
194 And ere he blew three notes (such sweet
195 Soft notes as yet musician's cunning
196 Never gave the enraptured air)
197 There was a rustling that seemed like a bustling
198 Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
199 Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
200 Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering,
201 And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering,
202 Out came the children running.
203 All the little boys and girls,
204 With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,
205 And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,
206 Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
207 The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.

XIII.

208 The Mayor was dumb, and the Council stood
209 As if they were changed into blocks of wood,
210 Unable to move a step, or cry
211 To the children merrily skipping by,
212 -- Could only follow with the eye
213 That joyous crowd at the Piper's back.
214 But how the Mayor was on the rack,
215 And the wretched Council's bosoms beat,
216 As the Piper turned from the High Street
217 To where the Weser rolled its waters
218 Right in the way of their sons and daughters!
219 However he turned from South to West,
220 And to Koppelberg Hill his steps addressed,
221 And after him the children pressed;
222 Great was the joy in every breast.
223 ``He never can cross that mighty top!
224 ``He's forced to let the piping drop,
225 ``And we shall see our children stop!"
226 When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side,
227 A wondrous portal opened wide,
228 As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
229 And the Piper advanced and the children followed,
230 And when all were in to the very last,
231 The door in the mountain-side shut fast.
232 Did I say, all? No! One was lame,
233 And could not dance the whole of the way;
234 And in after years, if you would blame
235 His sadness, he was used to say, --
236 ``It's dull in our town since my playmates left!
237 ``I can't forget that I'm bereft
238 ``Of all the pleasant sights they see,
239 ``Which the Piper also promised me.
240 ``For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
241 ``Joining the town and just at hand,
242 ``Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,
243 ``And flowers put forth a fairer hue,

244 ``And everything was strange and new;
245 ``The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,
246 ``And their dogs outran our fallow deer,
247 ``And honey-bees had lost their stings,
248 ``And horses were born with eagles' wings;
249 ``And just as I became assured
250 ``My lame foot would be speedily cured,
251 ``The music stopped and I stood still,
252 ``And found myself outside the hill,
253 ``Left alone against my will,
254 ``To go now limping as before,
255 ``And never hear of that country more!"

XIV.

256 Alas, alas for Hamelin!
257 There came into many a burgher's pate
258 A text which says that heaven's gate
259 Opes to the rich at as easy rate
260 As the needle's eye takes a camel in!
261 The mayor sent East, West, North and South,
262 To offer the Piper, by word of mouth,
263 Wherever it was men's lot to find him,
264 Silver and gold to his heart's content,
265 If he'd only return the way he went,
266 And bring the children behind him.
267 But when they saw 'twas a lost endeavour,
268 And Piper and dancers were gone for ever,
269 They made a decree that lawyers never
270 Should think their records dated duly
271 If, after the day of the month and year,
272 These words did not as well appear,
273 ``And so long after what happened here
274 ``On the Twenty-second of July,
275 ``Thirteen hundred and seventy-six:"
276 And the better in memory to fix
277 The place of the children's last retreat,
278 They called it, the Pied Piper's Street --

279 Where any one playing on pipe or tabor,
280 Was sure for the future to lose his labour.
281 Nor suffered they hostelry or tavern
282 To shock with mirth a street so solemn;
283 But opposite the place of the cavern
284 They wrote the story on a column,
285 And on the great church-window painted
286 The same, to make the world acquainted
287 How their children were stolen away,
288 And there it stands to this very day.
289 And I must not omit to say
290 That in Transylvania there's a tribe
291 Of alien people who ascribe
292 The outlandish ways and dress
293 On which their neighbours lay such stress,
294 To their fathers and mothers having risen
295 Out of some subterraneous prison
296 Into which they were trepanned
297 Long time ago in a mighty band
298 Out of Hamelin town in Brunswick land,
299 But how or why, they don't understand.

XV.

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