

THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN.

I.

Hamelin Town 's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its walls 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.

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.

IV.

An hour they sat 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?
Anything like the sound of a rat
Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!"

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 smiles went out and in—
There was no guessing his kith and kin!

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 his fingers, they noticed, were ever straying
As if impatient to be playing
Upon this pipe, which at the scarf's end 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.

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,
Cocking tails and pricking whiskers,
Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins,
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.

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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!"

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.
 "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!"

X.

The Piper's face fell, and he cried,
 "No trifling! I can't wait! beside,
 I've promised to visit by dinner time,
 Bagdat, 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."

XI.

"How?" cried the Mayor, "d'ye think I'll 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!"

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 farmyard where 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.

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—
 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 they were all in to the very last,
 The door in the mountain-side shut fast.

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,

The better in the memory to fix
 The place of the children's last retreat
 They called it, "Pied Piper's Street"—

And 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 until this very day.

ROBERT BROWNING.