

Shorter Poems

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by

Robert Browning

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THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN

A CHILD'S STORY

(Written for, and inscribed to W. M. the Younger)

I

Hamelin town's in Brunswick,

By famous Hanover city;

The river Weser, deep and wide,

Washes its walls on either 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?"
 (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!"

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,
 With 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:
 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 his way from his painted tombstone!"

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 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 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 swarms of gnats;
I eased in Asia the Nizam

Of a monstrous brood of vampire-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 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,
Already 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."

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, in-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 gypsy 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 for 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 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 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.

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 bosom 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 were 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
 Opes to the rich at as easy a 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 endeavor,
 And Piper and dancers were gone forever,
 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 who 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.

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!

TRAY

Sing me a hero! Quench my thirst
Of soul, ye bards!

Quoth Bard the first:

"Sir Olaf, the good knight, did don
His helm, and eke his habergeon..."
Sir Olaf and his bard—!

"That sin-scathed brow" (quoth Bard the second),
"That eye wide ope as tho' Fate beckoned
My hero to some steep, beneath
Which precipice smiled tempting Death..."
You too without your host have reckoned!

"A beggar-child" (let's hear this third!)
"Sat on a quay's edge: like a bird
Sang to herself at careless play,
And fell into the stream. 'Dismay!
Help, you the standers-by!' None stirred.

"Bystanders reason, think of wives
And children ere they risk their lives.
Over the balustrade has bounced
A mere instinctive dog, and pounced
Plumb on the prize. 'How well he dives!

"Up he comes with the child, see, tight
 In mouth, alive too, clutched from quite
 A depth of ten feet—twelve, I bet!
 Good dog! What, off again? There's yet
 Another child to save? All right!

"How strange we saw no other fall!
 It's instinct in the animal.
 Good dog! But he's a long while under:
 If he got drowned I should not wonder—
 Strong current, that against the wall!

"Here he comes, holds in mouth this time
 —What may the thing be? Well, that's prime!
 Now, did you ever? Reason reigns
 In man alone, since all Tray's pains
 Have fished—the child's doll from the slime!

"And so, amid the laughter gay,
 Trotted my hero off,—old Tray,—
 Till somebody, prerogated
 With reason, reasoned: 'Why he dived,
 His brain would show us, I should say.

"John, go and catch—or, if needs be,
 Purchase that animal for me!
 By vivisection, at expense
 Of half-an-hour and eighteen pence,
 How brain secretes dog's soul, we'll see!"

INCIDENT OF THE FRENCH CAMP

I

You know, we French stormed Ratisbon:

 A mile or so away

On a little mound, Napoleon

 Stood on our storming-day;

With neck out-thrust, you fancy how,

 Legs wide, arms locked behind,

As if to balance the prone brow

 Oppressive with its mind.

II

Just as perhaps he mused "My plans

 That soar, to earth may fall,

Let once my army-leader Lannes

 Waver at yonder wall"—

Out 'twixt the battery-smokes there flew

 A rider, bound on bound

Full-galloping; nor bridle drew

 Until he reached the mound,

III

Then off there flung in smiling joy,
 And held himself erect
 By just his horse's mane, a boy:
 You hardly could suspect—
 (So tight he kept his lips compressed.
 Scarce any blood came through)
 You looked twice ere you saw his breast
 Was all but shot in two.

IV

"Well," cried he, "Emperor, by God's grace
 We've got you Ratisbon!
 The Marshal's in the market-place,
 And you'll be there anon
 To see your flag-bird flap his vans
 Where I, to heart's desire,
 Perched him!" The chief's eye flashed; his plans
 Soared up again like fire.

V

The chief's eye flashed; but presently
 Softened itself, as sheathes
 A film the mother-eagle's eye
 When her bruised eaglet breathes.

"You're wounded!" "Nay," the soldier's pride

Touched to the quick, he said:

"I'm killed, Sire!" And his chief beside,

Smiling, the boy fell dead.

"HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS FROM GHENT TO AIX"

[16—]

I

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
"Good speed!" cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;
"Speed!" echoed the wall to us galloping through;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

II

Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place;
I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,
Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

III

'Twas moonset at starting; but while we drew near
Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear:
At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see;
At Dueffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be;
And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-chime,
So, Joris broke silence with, "Yet there is time!"

IV

At Aershot up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare through the mist at us galloping past,
And I saw my stout galloper Roland, at last,
With resolute shoulders, each butting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:

V

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track;
And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance
O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance!
And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and anon
His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

VI

By Hasselt, Dirck groaned; and cried Joris, "Stay spur!
 Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault's not in her,
 We'll remember at Aix"—for one heard the quick wheeze
 Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering knees,
 And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
 As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

VII

So, we were left galloping, Joris and I,
 Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky;
 The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
 'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff;
 Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
 And "Gallop," gasped Joris, "for Aix is in sight!"

VIII

"How they'll greet us!"—and all in a moment his roan
 Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;
 And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
 Of the news which alone could save Aix from her fate,
 With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
 And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.

IX

Then I cast loose my buff-coat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer;
Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, any noise, bad or good,
Till at length, into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

X

And all I remember is,—friends flocking round
As I sat with his head 'twixt my knees on the ground;
And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
As I poured down his throat our last measure of wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news from Ghent.