

Viktor Dyk

The Pied Piper

Translated by Mark Corner



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viktor Dyk (1877–1931) was a Czech writer of fiction, poetry, drama and translations, as well as literary, cultural and political criticism, whose patriotic and nationalist aspirations led him into politics later in life.

Dyk was born on the final day of 1877 in the village of Pšovka u Mělníka in the Kingdom of Bohemia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time. In 1888 his family moved to Prague, and during his secondary school education became a student of the patriotic Czech writer Alois Jirásek. He entered the Law Faculty of Charles University but also devoted himself to literature during his studies, writing poetry, short stories and the anti-Austrian novel *The End of Hackenschmid* (*Konec Hackenschmidův*) in this time.

He worked as an editor of the Czech literary weekly *Lumír* and then the anti-Austrian daily *Samostatnost* (Independence). During the First World War, he worked at Vinohrady Theatre until he was jailed in 1916–1917 for his anti-Austrian writings urging Czech independence.

With the end of World War I and the creation of the Czechoslovak state, Dyk was instrumental in creating the right-wing Czechoslovak National Democratic Party, and he was elected to parliament in 1920 and to the senate in 1925. He served in the senate up until he died of a heart attack while on vacation in Croatia in 1931.

Today he is primarily known as a prolific writer and the author of the classic Czech novella, *The Pied Piper* (Krysař). A retelling of the Saxon legend of the “Pied Piper of Hamelin,” Dyk’s *Pied Piper* can be read as a metaphor for Czech identity or as an erotic neo-gothic masterpiece. Perhaps because of its ambiguity and sensuality, the novella remains highly popular today with Czech students.

I

And your name is...?

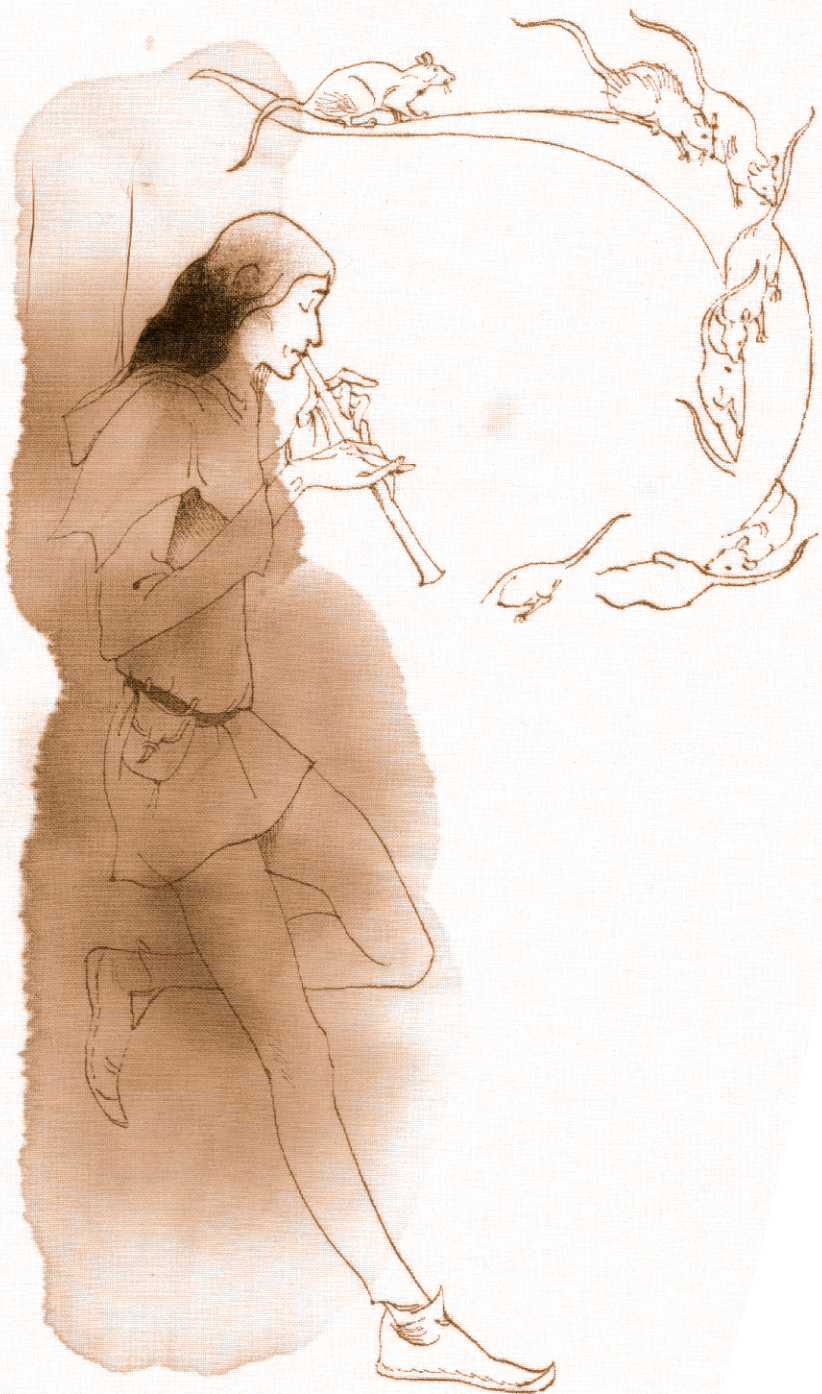
'I don't have one. I have no standing. Worse than that, I'm the Pied Piper, a ratcatcher.'

The man who spoke held himself erect before the gate while the outline of a female figure was a white glow in the twilight. His dark searching eyes were fixed upon her. He was tall and thin, the thinness accentuated by a close-fitting velvet coat and tight trousers. He had small and dainty hands, ladylike in fact. There was no weapon about his person, not even a cane, although he seemed to have come from afar on roads that weren't always safe. However, he was clutching something long and ornamental which had aroused the curiosity of the woman he was speaking to. It was a pipe and the workmanship was foreign. She had never seen anything like it before.

'A ratcatcher.' The woman in the doorway laughed. 'Then you've come to Hamelin at just the right time. There's no ratcatcher here, while there's no shortage of rats. Tell me something, ratcatcher, how did all these rats get here? In the old days there weren't any around, or so they tell us. But that's old folks for you,' she finished with a smile, 'always thinking that the world's going to the dogs.'

The Piper shrugged his shoulders.

'As to where they've all come from, I've no idea. But I do know that they're in every one of your homes. They're gnawing all the time. They're gnawing away down in the cellars, they're gnawing away where they can't be seen. They get more and more tenacious and come up higher. Are you getting a banquet ready? A wedding-feast? A christening, perhaps? Just imagine. Rats, long in the ear and the whisker, appear all of a sudden at the feast. I'm sure you can understand how such an apparition might ruin everyone's appetite.'



'Yes indeed,' laughed the woman in the doorway. 'A big rat turned up when Kateřina got married. The bridegroom went white as a sheet and Kateřina fainted. It's what people can put up with least, things that put them off their food; that's when they make up their minds to call the ratcatcher.'

'Would you be getting ready for a wedding or a baptism yourself?' asked the Pied Piper, without anything suggestive in his manner.

The woman in the doorway laughed out loud.

'One thing's for sure, you're not from round here, you're a stranger. I'm not attached, ratcatcher.'

The Piper bowed.

'Nothing wrong about that...nothing at all. And so they summon the Pied Piper. He pipes his pipe and the piping summons each one of these vermin out of its hiding-place. It follows in his wake like one enchanted. He leads them all to a river, to the Rhine or the Danube, to the Havel or the Weser. And the house is free of rats.'

The Piper bowed once more and a note of sadness entered his voice. The woman stayed silent while she fiddled with a sprig of jasmine.

'But if that's how it turns out, no one remembers the Pied Piper. The Piper is never the one to stay, always the one to move on. People are happy to see him coming. But they're happier still to see him on his way.'

'Is that so?' was her only response. The words sounded encouraging and yet they were perhaps not meant to encourage. But that was how the Pied Piper took them. His pale cheeks flushed; were it not for the darkness, she would have noticed the change.

'That's how I feel, my stranger. People have no love for a ratcatcher; it's fear he inspires.'

The girl laughed once again.

'How come the rats are such blind followers of yours, ratcatcher?'

The Piper pointed to the pipe, which seemed to spring to life in response to his movement.

'This instrument is one of a kind,' he said.

She threw the speaker a curious glance and looked at the pipe. Gently she touched it.

'A pipe,' she said dismissively. 'A pretty pipe. Even so, nothing but a pipe.'

'Rats have fine hearing and my pipe makes a fine sound.'

The eyes of the Pied Piper lit up with a peculiar gleam. The girl in the doorway took an instinctive step backwards. The sprig of jasmine trembled in her hand.

'I have a talent all my own for getting rid of rats,' the Piper went on, 'Sometimes I play very sad tunes on it, tunes from all the lands I've passed through. And I have passed through many, sunlit and sombre, flatlands and highlands. My pipe makes a very quiet sound. The rats hear it and they follow. There's no ratcatcher like me. I will tell you something else, stranger with the tinkling laugh. I have never put all the breath in my body into my piping; I've always dulled the sound. If I blew at full strength, it wouldn't only be the rats that followed in my wake.'

The Pied Piper stopped speaking. His eyes lost their fiery glow and unwittingly he lowered the hands holding the pipe.

'I daren't do that,' he added after a while, 'grievous things would be sure to follow.'

The girl stood in silence without taking her eyes off the Pied Piper and his pipe. When the Piper stayed quiet, she spoke very softly:

'I like you, ratcatcher. Before it was too dark I could make out streaks of silver in your black hair. Before you spoke I spotted the wrinkles on your forehead. But I like you all the same. I don't doubt that you have been loved by many women.'

‘Could be,’ replied the Pied Piper, ‘I really can’t remember.’

There was a strangely touching quality to the words of the Piper. The girl was taken by it. She leaned towards the Piper until he was almost within range of her hot breath.

‘I like you, ratcatcher,’ she repeated. ‘But in your place I would put everything into playing that pipe...all my strength.’

‘Do you know what that would mean?’ asked the Pied Piper in a sombre voice. ‘For I do not. All I know is that at times I am gripped by fear when I look at my pipe and see something that has been the death of many and will be the death of many more. And then I smile. After all, it’s nothing but a pretty pipe, you said so yourself. And I’m just a ratcatcher, whose job is to remove unwelcome guests. A ratcatcher, who like the Wandering Jew goes from town to town, from south to north, from west to east. And like the Wandering Jew I have no resting-place. I have already outstayed my welcome here, stranger.’

‘You have not,’ she said. Then she dropped her voice and whispered: ‘Call me Agnes.’

‘Agnes,’ he said. His voice was tender and musical. His mouth put a spell on everything.

She looked at him tensely.

‘Are you leaving Hamelin soon?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It’s not up to me. And...’

His look said the rest.

She laughed. It was the fresh and pure laughter of youth and joy. It sounded like a peal of bells to ring in the resurrection.

‘I think that you’ve got your work cut out; there’s no shortage of rats here.’

Then she became more serious as she added:

‘Stay here, ratcatcher.’

He made no reply. As they looked at each other their eyes did battle. She met the Piper's fiery gaze with questioning and troubled eyes. The sprig of jasmine trembled in her hands.

'I have a lover,' she said.

The Piper took hold of her hand.

'I don't want to see him. I don't want to hear about him. I know that there are many ugly things in this world. What is that to me, if they don't get in my way. I don't want to see him. But if I were to see him...'

A sad and sombre tone had crept into the Pied Piper's voice. It tolled like a funeral bell, sounding a note of caution.

'No,' she gasped. But it was not clear what this 'no' meant. They felt they were on a slope so steep that moving slowly was not an option and all they could do was take wings and fly. He took hold of her hand in his and she let him hold it. He pressed. He held her in a grip so passionate and intense that she could have cried out with the pain. But all the same she gripped in turn. She was intoxicated by the pain.

'Agnes,' he said.

It sounded like a question. It sounded like a plea.

She looked at him and smiled.

'I will,' she said. And it was clear what 'I will' meant. It was naked, shameless and without reserve. And the girl in the doorway handed the sprig of jasmine to the Pied Piper.

II

It was a corner of that worthy Hanseatic town of Hamelin, a corner so quiet and abandoned that it was almost as if there were no town. No heavily-laden carts with goods rattled by in this quarter; the clamour of the market wasn't to be heard and no horsemen in rich armour were to be encountered riding by. Not even the processions passed by here. Only the sound of bells from the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Hamelin came here. A sound that was sombre and melancholy, but being one of those sounds which are often heard, it no longer registered in our hearing. At the very least it can be said of Agnes that when she opened her window it was mostly voices that she heard.

Under her window there was a garden in full bloom, where the birds sang to her and everything was astir with life and met her greeting with smiles. There were so many delicious scents, each one intoxicating. And Agnes felt like another flower amongst those flowers, another scent among those scents.

The house was there as well with its old and pantile roof behind the foliage of the chestnut trees. But the house was able all of a sudden to find the daylight and open itself out beneath the sun.

The beautiful Agnes had a mother, a woman exhausted less by the years than by certain episodes that had brought her grief and that she recalled with a mixture of sadness and horror. She trudged through the house like a wraith, shivering with cold. She shied away from the sun and the light, fleeing from their presence like a night bird.

But Agnes did not seem to shy away from anything. With a trusting smile she was looking forward to the days ahead.

And the Pied Piper stayed on in Hamelin.

Driving out the rats.



For Hamelin it was quite an event. Young and old alike attended his every move. To young and old alike it was a wonder to see the rats blindly following in his wake as they went to their doom, bewitched by his pipe, the sound of which was scarcely more audible to the good and worthy citizens of Hamelin than the buzzing of insects in the distance.

And the surging river welcomed the rats and devoured them. The surging river embraced them and carried them off to the sea, the distant sea; never again would they put the worthy merchants of this Hanseatic town off their food.

The Pied Piper drove out the rats; but all the same there was something else behind his stay in Hamelin.