

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.

III

Sepp Jörgen, a fisherman, lived on the edge of the River Weser where it met with the Havel. His little house was small and meagre. He led the wretched life of a pauper.

People from all the different guilds in Hamelin mocked the poor fellow. He was slow-witted, a good lad but a clod-hopper. They said that whatever happened, he would only laugh or cry about it the next day. And they were right about that.

So far as the fishing was concerned, it hardly required thought. It required him to cast a net and wait. And few people knew how to wait in the way Sepp Jörgen did. He waited with patience and resignation; but only occasionally did his waiting bring a reward. They say that this is what happens to the patient and resigned who wait.

But Sepp Jörgen never lost patience. He understood that one day must be very like another and one night too. He understood that some people are to the manner born and some to misery. He understood that in town halls there are milords in showy fur coats and splendid chains of office who rule the roost, while in dens damp and dark there are the poor people who must obey. He understood all this, seeing that it had been evident to him for as long as he had lived.

He also knew that he had to avoid travelling when drunken mercenaries were out and about on the imperial highways. He knew all this, even though he was a dim-witted fellow.

And the one other thing he came to know was that everyone made fun of him. Everyone from his fellow fishermen to the girls in Hamelin. Over time this came to hurt him and it is difficult to say whose mockery hurt him the more. He often used to clench his fist and many times he felt a tightening in his chest. Unfortunately, thanks to his sad lot in life, these moments of pain would only come a day later. So the men who insulted him left unhurt and the women that



he might have loved vanished into the distance. This was the lot of the fisherman. And you can't escape your destiny.

For all that Sepp Jörgen was a sturdy lad with firm muscles and strong fists. A sturdy and by no means bad-looking lad, a lad with a good heart and good eyes, though tinged with an expression of fear.

His sole possession was a thrush in a cage on which he doted. He looked after it well, seeing that this was a simple and straightforward task, which didn't change from one day to the next and which was equally delightful from one day to the next, or so it seemed to Jörgen. The thrush in the cage did not mock him or wound him. And if the fisherman was troubled and had a heavy heart, it managed up to a point to calm that foolish heart of his. Jörgen the fisherman listened to the serene and soothing songbird. He forgot the poor catches he made, he forgot his poverty and the insults from all the people of Hamelin and the beautiful girls who fell for others and never for him. He smiled, deluded by birdsong; now everything was smiling on poor Sepp. Women passed by and kissed him.

The bird went on singing.

And Sepp Jörgen went on living, without waiting for anything more in his life.

IV

The lover's name was Kristián. They used to call him Lanky Kristián.

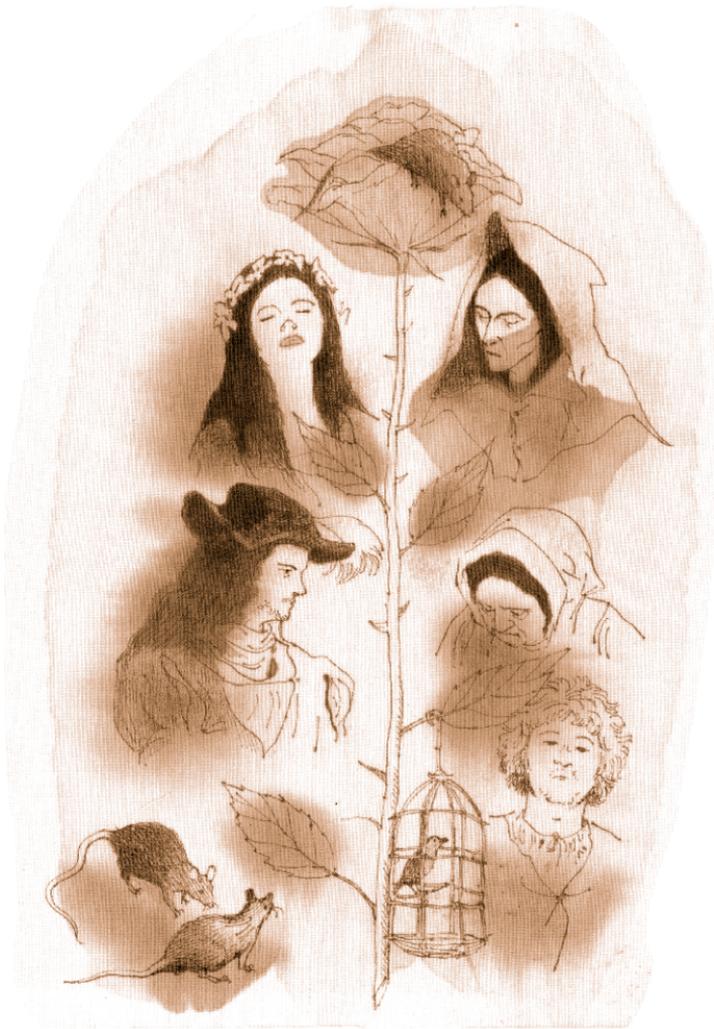
He had blond hair and blue eyes. He had everything that could be wished from a citizen of Hamelin: respectable parents, a good name and a reverent attitude to City Hall and the Church. He worked in his uncle's business in an arcade near the main square of Hamelin. It was a drapery business with a reputation that had spread far and wide. And since Kristián's uncle had no children of his own, Kristián nourished the hope that he would inherit the business. The only fly in the ointment lay in the fact that Uncle Ondřej's years did not stop his philandering ways, seeing that the sales in his shop could pay for what he needed to buy, a pursuit that caused an outcry in such a respectable town. Lanky Kristián did what he could. He removed temptation from his uncle's path. He arranged a housekeeper for him who was advanced in years and free of seductive power. Uncle Ondřej had little opportunity to chase skirt. And so Kristián veered between anguish and hope. In addition to all that he was in love with Agnes.

He shared his concerns with her and told her of sleepless nights when the thought of succubi weighed upon him like a nightmare: he explained about his uncle's philandering and how offended he felt as an upright man whose inheritance was in jeopardy.

Agnes was listening carefully.

Her concern was that Kristián should know nothing about the Pied Piper and that the Piper would never set eyes on Kristián.

It's true that Kristián sometimes spoke about the Piper and his merits, concerning which he said that the trade of ratcatcher, while useful and necessary, didn't strike him as sufficiently respectable or circumspect.



Agnes listened and concurred; or at least Kristián took her silence for agreement.

The Pied Piper went on remaining in Hamelin.

And Lanky Kristián went on veering between anguish and hope.

Above the beautiful Hanseatic town of Hamelin, the pride of its populace, towers the hill of Koppel, which is no less a source of pride.

Every Sunday the townsfolk leave behind them the gates of the town, and dressed up to the nines they make the climb to Koppel. The climb is a steep one and the sweat flows from their foreheads; but what a splendid vantage point from which to look out on the whole town and the countryside around it.

The climb has to pass through a pinewood that is somewhat sombre and – without the burghers of Hamelin even registering this – somewhat sad. But even the saddest wood puts its sadness on hold when it is filled with the happy and contented chatter of traders from a Hanseatic town, together with their respectable wives and daughters and the worthy young folk of Hamelin.

Above the woodland realm, which is as far as most people go, the hill of Koppel has other things to offer. All of a sudden you find yourself out of the woods. Boulders are strewn about that lost their way in this bare and empty expanse centuries ago. Do sit and look down upon the town below. Bathe in the sun's warmth and let the peace of the Sabbath fill your life. Because if you stride on any further, you will come to the abyss.

The abyss is a gaping chasm, cold and deep. You cannot see to its bottom. And if you throw a stone into it, long will be its fall. The hill of Koppel has a secret; the chasm may not just be a chasm but also a passageway. That's what some daring souls say, having ventured right to the edge while exploring Koppel's mystery.

But no one knows for sure.

They say only that the route from here goes very far under the earth. And then far, far away, over mountains and across rivers. As far as the land of seven castles. But people

say this without being aware of who told them. What is clear is that so far as is known no one has ever completed such an adventurous journey, no one has ever reached the realm of seven castles from here.

There came a day when the Pied Piper stood looking over the edge of this abyss.

He had passed through the pine wood and the desolate hill, where snakes were basking in the noonday sun. The Piper felt an impulse to go further and further.

He stood right at the edge, much closer than any native of Hamelin had dared to go. He stood at the edge and it seemed as though he was speaking with the abyss, the true love of all those who take their own lives.

What we can be sure of is that the Pied Piper felt the pull of the abyss: he stood above the chasm alone and deep in thought. The townsfolk of Hamelin would not have liked the expression in his eyes; there was not just one abyss at that moment, but two.

