

The Pied Piper of Providence

William Meikle

Based on The Pied Piper of Hamelin by Robert Browning

Once upon a time, on the shores of a great ocean in the north of the American continent, lay a town called Providence. The citizens of Providence were honest folk who lived contentedly in their gray stone houses. The years went by, and the people grew very rich. Then one day, an extraordinary thing happened to disturb the peace of this sleepy town.

All summer, there had been portents in the sky, and country folk talked of strange beasts roaming the hills to the north and east of the town. Being city dwellers and modern men, the councilmen of Providence would have no truck with such superstition. It was not until autumn that they were forced to pay closer attention to what was happening on their doorstep, and by then, it was too late.

The first indications something was amiss came when the local constabulary started to receive reports of missing cats. That in itself was not unusual in a city where the countryside was lush and wild just beyond the town limits. The borders were like a magnet that drew feline hunters to the woods to explore their wonders. But normally, those *explorers* would return to their homes of an evening, lured by the promise of food that could be procured more easily. Over the course of the first week of October, more and more cats stopped returning home. By the end of the month, there was not a single cat left in the town.

The first baby was bitten a day later.

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At first, the authorities suspected a wild animal attacked the child, something from the woods that had been given its opportunity by the strange disappearance of the cat population. But it quickly became apparent that whatever had bitten the baby was also the *cause* of the decline in felines.

Old lady Malcolm was the first to see them when, on descending into her cellar late in the evening, she was attacked by six large rats, which bit her most grievously before she managed to fight them off with a broom.

It was not long after the rats grew bold enough to be seen in daylight. Soon, reports came in from all over town of rats in the grain stores, rats in the butcher's meat locker, rats in basements, and rats in the walls.

A council meeting was convened in the Town Hall. John Berryman, the mayor, called the meeting to order...just as a *whooshing* scraping noise filled the room. Tapestries writhed, and mortar trickled from loose stone before the sound finally subsided, rushing away to subterranean depths.

"What's to be done?" Berryman asked. "Has anyone called out the dogs?"

"There are no dogs," George Priestley said. "They've all gone. Either run off or scared off." Councillor Bill Timmings laughed nervously and scratched at a fresh bandage on his hand, the result of trying, unsuccessfully, to shoo a rat from his bedside the night before. He held up the hand to show the others.

“The thing was as big as any of the dogs,” he said. “And twice as bold. If they’re all like that, it’s not dogs we need but a miracle.”

Fresh screams rose from outside on the streets as if to counterpoint his argument. As a man, the councilors rushed to the window and looked on a scene of terror. Initially, it appeared as though a heaving black carpet of fur was making its way down the thoroughfare, then they saw, only too clearly, the rat pack had broken out into the open.

They ranged in size from only a few inches to great beasts as big as dogs, all with too-red tongues and pink, hairless tails that swayed obscenely in the air. Townspeople fled in the face of this new assault.

The councilmen watched, white-faced, as an elderly lady tripped, fell, and was engulfed, a pale arm waving feebly before being splattered red then devoured in seconds.

The council turned, ashen-faced, from the window, trying to blot out the few remaining pathetic screams.

“What’s to be done?” the mayor whispered.

No one answered for the longest time, and they were saved doing so by a heavy knock on the chamber door. It swung open to reveal the most preposterous figure standing in the doorway, a wizened old man, bent with age, dressed in a leather outfit dyed in bright, gaudy shades of red, green, yellow, and purple.

The old man’s face was too long, too thin, exaggerating the size of his teeth, particularly the front two, which seemed too large for his mouth and hung over his lower lip. Coarse, black hair fell in a cape down his back from an almost bald head, and pink eyes peered from beneath heavy brows. As he came forward into the chamber, he walked stiffly as if unsure on his feet. His pale pink hands were clutched tightly to his chest, carrying a pair of thin wooden flutes.

“And who might you be?” the mayor asked.

The wizened figure bowed at the waist.

“I am Rattenfänger Van Hameln,” he said, his voice a high, thin whine. “And I have come to do you a favor.”

*To be continued in *Twice Upon an Apocalypse – Lovecraftian Fairy Tales*