

RATCATCHER

By Paul Allor

NOTE TO THE ARTIST:

A couple of quick things. First, I am not a visual artist. If you read anything in this script and think, "I know a better way to show that," then by all means, do it. One possible exception: I've tried to end each page with a mini-cliffhanger, so please talk to me before deciding to end the page on a different panel.

Second, our story takes place in a small European village. I've intentionally left the timeframe vague, and I'm not terribly worried about anachronisms. Wooden floor panels play a significant role in our story, and I believe they came about sometime in the 16th Century. As long as we don't show anybody in the background warming up their Amy's Frozen Tofu Burrito in the microwave, I think we're okay.

Third, no one in this story is named in the dialogue (though the Mayor is named by title). Our only characters with dialogue are the Pied Piper, the Mayor, Villagers One, Two and Three, and the Girl.

PAGE ONE

Panel one

A small church, with only a handful of congregants. A pastor is preaching to the almost-empty room. There's a word balloon springing from his mouth, but it is blank. The preacher looks drained, even a little bored; he's going through the motions, but his faith is long gone. Amongst the congregation is a young GIRL. In fact, she is the only child in the room.

Panel two

In the kitchen of a modest home. The Girl is sitting at the table, while her parents, in the background, are fighting, yelling at one another, gesticulating wildly. Again, their word balloons are blank.

Panel three

The Girl is walking down the village's main street, a wide cobblestone road. She is passing by a blacksmith's shop. The blacksmith, a burly man in his early thirties, is sitting at his anvil, sobbing openly. He is a defeated man, and no longer cares who knows it.

Panel four

In a merchant's shop, a woman has grabbed the Girl by the front of her dress, and is screaming fiercely at her. The woman's face is flushed and red. Spittle is coming out of her mouth. So is a word balloon, which is, of course, blank. However, there is a:

CAPTION 1
It wasn't always this way.

Panel five

An exterior shot of the Village's cobblestone road. Children are playing, men are talking and smoking pipes, women are standing on their porch steps, shaking out their sheets.

CAPTION 2
We were a normal village once. Not extraordinary. But ordinary. And content.

Panel six

Same shot as above, but now, at the bottom of the panel, we see a swarm of rats pouring into the village.

CAPTION 3
Then the rats arrived.

PAGE TWO

On this page, our panels will alternate between shots of the rats taking over the village, and a scene taking place in the Town Hall.

Panel one

A swarm of rats are knocking over a baby cradle, while several feed on the (still living) baby spilling out of it.

Panel two

Town Hall. In the background we see that the windows are boarded up, the doors bolted, created a sanctuary from the rats. VILLAGER ONE is screaming, waving one arm in the air. The MAYOR, a large, elderly man, has taken off his glasses, and is rubbing the bridge of his nose to ward off an impending headache. In stark contrast to the other villagers, the Mayor is well dressed, with a fine fur robe. There are perhaps four other men around them. It's clear from their expressions that these are furious, desperate men. They've been arguing for hours.

VILLAGER ONE

No, I don't know what to do about it. But I'm not the Mayor, sir. You are.

MAYOR

I did not require a reminder. What you need to understand --

Panel three

A swarm of rats are fighting a large, mangy dog to the death. The dog, fangs bared, is doing a good job keeping one wave at bay, but another wave of rats is coming from the rear, attacking his tail, hind legs and mid-section.

Panel four

Back in Town Hall. Villager One is leaning in close to the Mayor now. In the background, we see the Pied Piper, out of focus. It's unclear where he came from.

VILLAGER ONE

I understand all too well. You're old and fat and you expected this to be an easy job. Too bloody bad.

VILLAGER TWO

Enough! We've been down this road all day.

VILLAGER THREE

Yes, we have. We left productive discussion behind miles ago, and now we're approaching violence.

Panel five

A merchant guards his shop, armed with a broomstick. He's using it to ward off the approaching rats, but it's clearly a losing battle.

Panel six

Town Hall. The Pied Piper has approached the assembled villagers. He is tall and thin, wearing dirty clothes stitched together from various materials. Yet his bearing is stiff, almost aristocratic. The Pied Piper is often depicted as warm and friendly, but let us not forget, this is a man who robbed an entire village of its children. He is a cold, stern-looking man.

PIED PIPER

Perhaps I can be of assistance.

PAGE THREE

Panel one

Town Hall. The Pied Piper clearly has the villagers' rapt attention, though this likely has more to do with his appearance than his offer of assistance.

PIED PIPER

Gentlemen, I am blessed with ... a gift.
A way with animals. All animals. I can
control them. Make them follow me.

VILLAGER ONE

Nonsense.

PIED PIPER

I did not misspeak, sir. Any animal.
Granted, I prefer to work with low
creatures. Vermin. But there have been
exceptions.

Panel two

The villagers are taken aback by the preposterous things the Piper is saying. VILLAGER THREE, in particular, is laughing out loud.

PIED PIPER

I've rescued a Chinese village from
vampire bats, an African tribe from
poisonous toads. And I can save your
town. For 1,000 Guilders.

VILLAGER THREE

Ha! Why not just make it 50,000?

PIED PIPER

Because I am a fair man. 1,000 Guilders
is the offer.

Panel three

It's clear, at this point, that the villagers are simply humoring the Pied Piper, stifling laughs, rolling their eyes. He has provided a brief, amusing respite, but soon, they know, they will have to return to serious matters. Meanwhile, the Pied Piper is pulling a flute out from amongst his garments.

MAYOR

Sir, we have a deal. You magically call
the rats away, and the village purse
strings are yours.

PIED PIPER

Excellent. I'm pleased we were able to come to an agreement.

Panel four

The Pied Piper is standing in the street, playing his flute. Rats are swarming around him. In the background we can see some astonished villagers, including the folks from the previous scene, and the Girl from page one. The woman from page one (the spittle-mouthed screamer) is also there. She is holding a toddler, and has two or three other children gathered around her legs.

Panel five

Outside of town, where the cobblestone road has turned to dirt, and ends at the banks of the river. The Pied Piper is walking towards the water, the rats following.

CAPTION 1

They followed him to the river, just outside of town.

Panel six

A wide-angle shot of the river, filled with drowned rats.

CAPTION 2

And then they followed him in.

PAGE FOUR

Panel one

The villagers have also followed the Pied Piper down the dirt road, and are gathered around him like a swarm.

PIED PIPER

I have done my part. Make payment, and I will be on my way.

VILLAGER TWO

Payment for what? Witchcraft? You appear out of nowhere, and - my God, man, you think it isn't clear? You think -

VILLAGER THREE

You think we are stupid men? It is clear.
You do more than control vermin. You
conspire with them.

MAYOR

Enough! Witchcraft or not, it makes no
difference. But you can't possibly
believe this poor village has 1,000
Guilders to spare.

Panel two

Close up: The Pied Piper has grabbed the Mayor's robe, and is holding the fur
between his fingers, inspecting it.

PIED PIPER

I believe exactly that thing.

Panel three

The Pied Piper is still holding the Mayor's robe. Villager Three has placed
his hand over the Piper's wrist.

VILLAGER ONE

Remove your hand. Our Mayor is an
ostentatious prig. An oaf and
occasionally an ass. But he is ours.

MAYOR

(small type - said in a low voice)
How kind of you.

PIED PIPER

Gentlemen, you are making a mistake. It
will not be without consequence.

VILLAGER TWO

Oh? What? You'll bring back the dead
rats? You fill me with terror, sir.

Panel four

Close on the Pied Piper's face, his expression blank but his eyes cold, as he
contemplates the fate of this foolish village.

Page five

An identical panel. But this time the Pied Piper is speaking.

PIED PIPER

I will be in your town's hall at this time tomorrow. You would do well to have my payment waiting.

PAGE FIVE

Panel one

An establishing shot of the village at night, lit by lanterns hung along the side of the cobblestone street.

Panel two

Inside her home, the Girl is lifting a floorboard in her room. We are at a high angle looking down, and we can see, hidden under the floorboards, three dull copper coins inside. They don't look terribly impressive.

CAPTION 1

That night, I retrieved my savings. Coins I had hidden even from my parents.

CAPTION 2

I assumed others in the village were doing the same. I was wrong.

Panel three

On the street outside the Girl's house, during the day. The Pied Piper is there, and the Girl is dropping the three coins into his hand. He looks at her quizzically. He has never encountered this sort of generosity before.

CAPTION 3

As he walked by my house the next day, I came out to greet him.

GIRL

It's not much, sir, but it's what I have.

Panel four

Close shot, as the Pied Piper drops the coins back into her hand.

PIED PIPER

Young lady, my quarrel is with your elders. Keep your treasure.

Panel five

As the Pied Piper walks away, the Girl stares down at the coins in wonderment.

Panel six

Small inset shot of the Girl's hand. We see that as the Pied Piper returned her copper coins, he added several shiny gold ones.

PAGE SIX

Panel one

Town Hall. The Pied Piper is just entering, and sees that the room is completely empty. The villagers have not even bothered to face him.

Panel two

Close on the Pied Piper's face, looking around the empty room.

PIED PIPER

Very well. I made every effort.

Panel three

Back on the street, the Pied Piper is walking down the cobblestone road, past the Girl's house. We can just see her head through a small window.

Panel four

Small inset panel on the Pied Piper, glancing at the Girl's house. Considering his options.

Panel five

Another small inset panel of the Pied Piper's hand, turning a doorknob, letting himself in to the Girl's home.

Panel six

The Girl is kneeling on the floor, putting her coins back into the hole beneath the floorboard. We have a better angle of her room, now. It is a simple one; a bureau, a bed, and a window that looks out on the cobblestone street.

She is looking up, astonished, as the Pied Piper enters.

PAGE SEVEN

Panel one

The Pied Piper kneels down next to her, pulling out his flute.

PIED PIPER
I'm very sorry, young lady. But this is
going to hurt quite a lot.

Panel two

The Pied Piper leans over, and plays the flute directly into the Girl's ears. She screams in pain.

Panel three

Large panel, taking up three-quarters of the page. The Girl is crumpled on the floor, crying, in unimaginable agony. A small trickle of blood is spilling out of her ear.

The Pied Piper is leaving the room. As he does, he says something, but it comes out as a blank word balloon. Now we understand the significance of the blank word balloons from our first page: He has deafened her forever.

PAGE EIGHT

Panel one

In the Girl's room. She is sitting on her bed, holding her knees to her chest, crying softly next to the window that looks out on the cobblestone street. Outside the window we see the Pied Piper. He is looking directly at her, but is too far away to make out his expression.

CAPTION ONE
I thought I would never see him again.
Instead he returned that night. To
inflict some new horror upon me, I
thought.

Panel two

The same shot. The Girl has noticed him, and is starting out her window in terror.

CAPTION TWO
But then I realized --

Panel three

Out on the street, the Pied Piper raises his flute to his lips.

CAPTION THREE

-- that I was not the reason he had returned.

NOTE TO ARTIST: The next three shots mirror the final three panels on page three. Only this time, it's nighttime, and it's children, not rats, who are following the Piper.

Panel four

Night in the village. The Pied Piper is standing on the cobblestone street, playing his flute. Children have exited their homes and are gathering around him.

CAPTION 1

He played a song only the children could hear. The children who could hear.

Panel five

Outside of town, where the cobblestone road has turned to dirt, and ends at the banks of the river. The Pied Piper is walking toward the river, the rats following.

CAPTION 2

I was too frightened to intervene, as they followed him to the river, just outside of town.

Panel six

A wide-angle shot of the river, filled with drowned children.

CAPTION 3

And as they followed him in.

PAGE NINE

Panel one

The next day, at the river. The men of the village wade in, recovering the bodies of their sons and daughters, their nephews and nieces, brothers and sisters, grandsons and granddaughters. The blacksmith from page one is

holding his son in his arms. His head is turned to the sky, and he is wailing like a dying animal.

CAPTION 1

In the following days, we did what we could.

Panel two

The town cemetery. The entire village is in attendance as a dozen children are buried. The village pastor is delivering the sermon. Another blank word balloon.

CAPTION 2

We buried the bodies we were able to recover before the river had pulled them too far downstream.

Panel three

The Mayor, hanging from a massive tree, a noose tied around his neck.

CAPTION 3

Many of the adults left. Left this village or left this world.

Panel four

The Girl is walking down the cobblestone street. The adults of the village are staring at her, their eyes filled with sorrow, anger and disgust.

CAPTION 3

Those who remain look at me and wonder, "why have you been spared?"

Panel five

In the Girl's house, the Girl, her Mother and her Father, are eating supper. They are looking at the daughter with the same expression of deep sorrow and anger from the previous panel.

CAPTION 3

My parents look at me and wonder, "Why have you been taken from us?"

PAGE TEN

Panel one

The Girl is in her room. The floorboard is once again removed. She is starting down at her coins.

CAPTION 1

I don't have an answer. And I don't have
the strength to seek one out.

Panel two

The Girl is walking along the cobblestone street, in the direction of the river.

CAPTION 2

It takes all my effort just to survive
the present.

Panel three

The Girl is standing at the river's edge.

CAPTION 2

Wait for the future.

Panel four

The Girl is still standing at the river's edge. Her arm is outstretched, captured in mid-throw. From her fingertips we see the copper and gold coins, being thrown into the river, to wash downstream, and out of her life.

CAPTION 3

And leave the past where it belongs.

END