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THE PIPER —— ton reynolds

"LORD! HE'S TH EFE AGAIN! HE'S THEFE! LOOK!" the old man croaked, jabbing a calloused finger at the burial hill. "Old Piper again! As crazy as a loon! Every year that way!"

The Martian boy at the feet of the old man stirred his thin reddish feet in the soil and affixed his large green eyes upon burial hill where the Piper stood. "Why does he do that?" asked the boy.

"Ah?" The old man's leathery face rumpled into a maze of wrinkles. "He's crazy, that's what. Stands up there piping on his music from sunset until dawn."

The thin piping sounds squealed in the dusk, echoed back from the low hills, were lost in melancholy silence, fading. Then louder, higher, insanely, crying with shrill voice.

The Piper was a tall, gaunt man, face as pale and wan as Martian moons, eyes electrical purple, standing against the soft of the dusking heaven, holding his pipe to his lips, playing. The Piper — a silhouette — a symbol — a melody.

"Where did the Piper come from?" asked the Martian boy.

"From Venus." The old man took out his pipe and filled it. Oh, some twenty years ago or more, on the projectile with the Terrestrians. I arrived on the same ship, coming from Earth, we shared a double seat together."

"What is his name?" Again the boyish, eager voice.

"I can't remember. I don't think I ever knew, really."

A vague rustling sound came into existence. The Piper continued playing, paying no heed to it. From the darkness, across the star-jewelled horizon, came mysterious shapes, creeping, creeping.

"Mars is a dying world," the old man said. "Nothing ever happens of much gravity. The Piper, I believe, is an exile."

The stars trembled like reflections in water, dancing with the music.

"An exile." The old man continued. "Something like a leper. They called him THE BRILLIANT. He was the epitome of all Venerian culture until the Earthmen came with their greedy incorporations and licentious harlots. The Earthlings outlawed him, sent him here to Mars to live out his days."

"Mars is a dying world," repeated the boy. "A dying world. How many Martians are there, sir?"

The old man chuckled. "I guess maybe you are the last pure Martian alive, boy. But there are millions of others."

"Where do they live? I have never seen them."

"You are young. You have much to see, much to learn."

"Where do they live?"

"Out there, beyond the mountains, beyond the dead sea bottoms, over the horizon and to the north, in the caves, far back in the subterrane."

"Why?"

"Why? Now that's hard to say. They were a brilliant race once upon a time. But something happened to them, hybridized them. They are unintelligent creatures now, cruel beasts."

"Does Earth own Mars?" the little boy's eyes were riveted upon the glowing planet overhead, the green planet.

"Yes, all of Mars. Earth has three cities here, each containing one thousand people. The closest city is a mile from here, down the road, a group of small metal bubble-like buildings. The men from Earth move about among the buildings like ants enclosed in their space suits. They are miners. With their huge machines they rip open the bowels of our planet and dig out our precious life-blood from the mineral arteries."

"Is that all?"

"That is all." The old man shook his head sadly. "No culture, no art, no purpose. Greedy, hopeless Earthlings."

"And the other two cities---where are they?"

"One is up the same cobbled road five miles, the third is further still by some five hundred miles."

"I am glad I live here with you, alone." The boy's head nodded sleepily. "I do not like the men from Terra. They are despoilers."

"They have always been. But someday," said the old man, "they will meet their doom. They have blasphemed enough, have they. They cannot own planets as they have and expect nothing but greedy luxury for their sluggishly squat bodies. Someday---!" His voice rose high, in tempo and pitch with the Piper's wild music.

Wild music, insan music, stirring music. Music to stir the savage into life. Music to effect man's destiny!

"Wild-eyed Piper on the hill,
Crying out your rigadoons,
Bring the savages to kill
'Neath the wanling Martian moons!"

"What is that?" asked the boy.

"A poem," said the old man. "A poem I have written in the last few days. I feel something is going to happen very soon. The Piper's song is growing more insistent every night. At first, twenty years ago, he played on only a few nights of every year, but now, for the last three years he has played until dawn every night of every autumn when the planet is dying."

"Bring the savages?" the boy sat up. "What savages?"

"There!"

Along the star-glimmered mountain tops a vast clustering herd of black, murmuring, advancing. The music screamed higher and higher.

"Piper, pipe that song again!
So he piped, I wept to hear."

"More of the poem?" asked the boy.

"Not my poem--but a poem from Earth some seventy years ago. I learned it in school."

"Music is strange." The little boy's eyes were scintillant with thought. "It warms me inside. This music makes me angry. Why?"

"Because it is music with a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"We shall know by dawn.

"Music is the language of all things -- intelligent or not, savage or educated civilian. This Piper knows his music as a god knows his heaven. For twenty years he has composed his hymn of action and hate and finally, tonight perhaps, the finale will be reached. At first, many years ago, when he played, he received no answer from the subterrane, but the murmur of gibbering voices. Five years ago he lured the voices and the creatures from their caves to the mountain tops. Tonight, for the first time, the herd of black will spill over the trails toward our hovel, toward the road, toward the cities of man!"

Music screaming, higher, faster, insanely, sending shock after macabre shock thru night air, loosening the stars from their riveted stations. The Piper stretched high, six feet or more, upon his hillock, swaying back and forth, his thin shape attired in brown-cloth. The black mass on the mountain came down like amoebic tent-

acles, met and coalesced, muttering and mumbling. "Go inside and hide," said the old man. "You are young, you must live to propagate the new Mars. Tonight is the end of the old, tomorrow begins the new! It is death for the men of Earth!" Higher still and higher. "Death! They come to overrun the Earthlings, destroy their cities, take their projectiles. Then - in the ships of man -- to Earth! Turnabout! Revolution and Revenge! A new civilization! When monsters usurp men and men's greediness crumbles at his demise!" Shriller, faster, higher, insanely tempoed. "The Piper -- The Brilliant One --He who has waited for years for this night. Back to Venus to reinstall the glory of his civilization! The return of Art to humanity!"

"But they are savages, these unpure Martians," the boy cried.

"Men are savages. I am ashamed of being a man," the old man said, tremblingly. "Yes, these creatures are savages, but they will learn - these brutes--with music. Music in many forms ---- music for peace, music for love - music for hate and music for death. The Piper and his brood will set up a new cosmos. He is immortal!" Now, hurrying, muttering up the road, the first cluster of black, things reminiscent of men. A strange sharp odor in the air. The Piper, from his hillock, walking down the road, over the cobbles, to the city. "Piper, pipe that song again!" cried the old man. "Go and kill and live again! Bring us love and art again! Piper, pipe the song! I weep!" Then: "Hide, child, hide quickly! Before they come! Hurry!" And the child, crying, hurried to the small house and hid himself thru the night.

Swirling, jumping, running, leaping, gamboling, crying--the new humanity surged to man's cities, his rockets, his mines. The Piper's song! Stars shuddered. Winds stilled. Nightbirds sang no songs. Echoes murmured only the voices of the ones who advanced, bringing new understanding. The old man, caught in the whirlpool of ebon, was swept down, screaming. Then up the road, by the awful thousands, vomiting out of hills, sprawling from caves, curling, huge fingers of beasts, around and about and down to the Man Cities. Sighing, leaping up, voices and destruction!

Rockets across the sky!

Guns. Death.

And finally, in the pale advancement of dawn, the memory, the echoing of the old man's voice. And the little boy arose to start afresh a new world with a new mate.

Echoing, the old man's voice:

"Piper, pipe that song again! So he piped, I wept to hear!"

A new day dawned.