FRANCIS GEORGE RAYER

PIPE AWAY STRANGER

They heard it when their ears had ceased to ring from the concussion of the for'ad tubes. A thin, warbling note, it could have been the playing of reedy fairy pipes.

Raccety looked out through the open air lock, fingers restless as if still on the firing studs. One cheek twitched. He glanced back over one shoulder at the others.

"So this is it, men! First on Mars! "

They looked past him. A dusty sun was low in a weak blue sky. Undulating brown earth stretched from the crease the vessel had made, featureless as a frozen sea from ship to horizon. Thinly-scattered cacti tall as a man grew on every dune and hillock.

"You lost your tongues?" Raccety demanded.

One of the men at the back swore. " Expect us to dance and throw flowers?"

Raccety let it pass. They were ordinary chaps, picked only because of their technical qualifications, and no heroes. The one next him, tall, thin, and only half his age, touched his arm.

"What's that noise .... ?"

The unease was in his voice Raccety looked at the dusty land- scape and dull, long-spined cacti.

"Maybe wind, Starkey. Maybe - something else."

They looked at each other, listening. The thin, reedy piping rose and fell, wavering away, returning, a woody vibration unlike anything on Earth.

The big man at the back came along the air lock passage. " Were we paid to stand here? "

"No, Joe."

Raccety stepped down on to the dusty ground. So I 'm the first man to set foot on Mars, he thought. It was no thrill. Six weeks in a tin-can only fit to reach the moon could dull even the most ardent expectation.

The piping did not cease. They heard it as they unloaded a fortune in equipment and set up an observation post. They heard it as they unloaded the sand-wagon, preparing to explore. Raccety listened to it as he stood near the hastily erected hut, and heard it as he paced back through the brown dust. Joe stood by the ship, his sandy head bare, mopping his face.

"What the hell is it?" he asked.

Raccety knew what he meant." Wind in the cactus .... ? "

"You know it's not!"

"It may be."

Joe surveyed him pensively. "You're a good rocket-man, Raccety, but a damn bad liar."

Raccety scratched a long cheek with one finger. "Then perhaps you'll tell me what it is?"

They left it at that and loaded stores into the sand-wagon. The warbling piping was always there, sometimes muted, sometimes rising and quavering melodiously.

The six of them drove through the dotted cacti, Wilson, quiet, forty, at the wheel. Joe, bouncing up and down in the back with Berky and Clay, seemed to have found his tongue.

"Dry as dust," he said. "The whole planet's dry as dust. It's dry like dusty bones and dead leaves. It's old - old. It was drying up when Earth was a steaming wilderness."

He cocked his head around, staring at the prickly pillars of the eternal cacti. Raccety stood up in the front seat, holding the bar topping the windscreen. Far away to their left the ground seemed higher. He pointed it out to Wilson.

"Go that way."

They turned off through the never-ending prickly pillars, the sand- wagon swaying to the billows like a boat at sea.

"It's dead, too," Joe stated from the back seat. " We've come the very hell of a long time too late."

"That remains to be seen," Raccety said.

Starkey nodded. His face had a pale, creamy-white colour that spoke of fear. "I - I don't like it," he said.

Joe laughed, too loudly. "Am I laughing my head off at joy of being here?"

Starkey half turned, an arm on the seat back. "I- I mean it's so - so strange. This isn't Earth. Don't you see what that means? There, a desert was just a desert. The sand and dust were Earth sand and dust. The air we breathed was Earth air. This isn't. Nothing belongs to us, here."

Joe swore. The sound grated. "Shut up!" he said.

Wilson cleared his throat. "There's a lot in what the kid says."

"So what?"

They were silent. The sand-wagon rolled on across the brown dust and Raccety looked back through the marching cacti.

"Maybe that noise we hear is wind," Clay said from the back seat. "Maybe," Raccety said. He watched the two long trails the vehicle's tracks made. The dust, a line brown powder, settled slowly as they passed on. There was no wind.

"If it is the wind, that's why it seems all around us," Berky said eagerly.

"It's blowing through these cacti." His voice rose a note. "I've heard the wind like that before, back on Earth. The wind can do funny things. ...." His voice sank abruptly and he trailed off.

Raccety drew in his lips. The piping was no wind. It rose and fell, moaned and warbled.

"I- I've heard the wind like this, before-" Berky stated again, an edge to his voice.

Joe said something inaudible. "The hell you have! Where?"

The sand-wagon murmured up rising ground. The cacti fell away behind, and thinned a trifle ahead. The dust of their passing settled like brown smoke on a windless day. Raccety faced about once more.

A slender white minaret of indescribable beauty rose into view beyond the ridge. Other towers and pinnacles surrounded it, extending on and on in the valley bottom.

"A - a city," Starkey breathed.

Wilson halted the sand-wagon. They gazed down as upon some fabulous eastern city. Slender, lofty turrets pointed at the pale sky; row upon row of terraces ran between ornate buildings. Windows peeped from marble walls; carved parapets ran on and on, stately, fragile, beyond words beautiful. Long minutes passed, then Joe spoke.

"There's no one there."

They drove down into the city, slowing as they reached the first buildings. Alabaster walls reached above them, creamy and carved. Raccety lowered his eyes. Fine brown dust lay through the streets. Nothing showed how deep it might be.

"They're all dead," Joe said, " were dead before we were born."

They halted the sand-wagon and got out. Terraces rose level upon level. A thousand doors stood open; a thousand empty windows looked down upon them. Raccety listened to the piping.

Joe released an oath. "Call this a proper reception? Call this right when we come so damn far?" He stuck his hands in his belt, scowling round at the silent buildings. "Hey, you damn Martians! Ain't you coming out?"

The shout faded in diminishing echoes. Starkey put a hand on the other's arm.

"Don't - - "

Joe snarled. Don't! The hell why not?"

"It's like - like shouting in a church."

Joe laughed off key and spat in the brown dust. "I'll do more than shout! I'll waken 'em! "His right hand went to his belt and rose with a weapon that was only to have been used in essential defence. "I'll show 'em!" he said.

The hand gun spat and kicked. Bolts shot down the street, and through windows and doors. A pinnacle tumbled in a sudden mumble of stone. Silence came and Raccety drew his gaze from the settling dust.

"Put it away, Joe. We're all nervy enough."

Muttering, Joe replaced the weapon. "Nothing but damned piping," he said defensively.

They searched until nightfall and found no living thing. The halls and rooms were

empty of all but the most durable relics of an alien culture.

Raccety stood in the silence and knew that they would find no one. The builders of the great city were long gone. The warbling, reedy piping followed them wherever they went. He saw the strain growing on his companions' faces. When they spoke loudly, their voices echoed in the stone rooms. When one whispered, each looked at the others as if suddenly afraid.

Joe halted in the middle of a mosaic floor where green and gold made a strange design.

"All dead," he said. "All gone. We're boss, now. Let's celebrate." The others looked at him. "Celebrate-?"

"That's what I said! This dry-as-dust, museum of a planet owes us at least that!"

Starkey shuffled uneasily." You only want to make a noise, Joe, so you won't hear the piping. You want to forget about the millions who built this place - you're afraid, like the lot of us."

Joe scowled at him. "So I'm afraid, kid. So what? I've been afraid before, and lived to tell of it." He laughed. Too loud, the sound echoed, the laugh of a man unsure of himself. "What d'you think was in that box I smuggled in and guarded more carefully than Clay here guards his test - tubes and things! "

He strode to the door, the beam of his hand-lamp playing ahead. The place echoed to his steel-shod boots, then was still.

Still, Raccety thought, but not silent. There had never been silence- only stillness. Behind the stillness was the piping, warbling on and on, rising as if in triumph, falling as if in sorrow. Sometimes it was very low, sometimes loud. But it had never ceased.

"Let's get back to the ship," Starkey said abruptly. Wilson, Berky, and Clay exchanged glances, and Wilson nodded.

"We should be in the ship now it's dark."

He looked round, shining his lamp along the walls. The empty black of windows and doors looked back at them. Clay moved. His boots sounded loud on the stone.

"Yes, let's go back," he said.

Light shone in a doorway and Joe came, carrying an armful of bottles. He set them down upon the mosaic.

"What better than that the living should drink to the dead," he said, and raised an opened bottle. "To our absent hosts."

No one laughed. He drank again and opened the other bottles. "I know it as a fact that there's not a teetotaler among you," he said. Raccety watched him. "That bottle in your hand wasn't the first you opened, Joe."

Joe drank and wiped his mouth on the back of a hand. "So what?"

Berky crossed to him. "I feel like a drink--"

Joe nodded encouragement. "Help yourself. That's what it's for."

Raccety left them. He stood alone in an outer doorway. The night was windless. No air cooled his face and the two small moons sat like coloured pebbles in a featureless sky. The piping rose and fell all around him. Away behind, echoing, he heard Joe's laugh, followed by voices.

Raccety shrugged. The stillness came back. He listened, striving to locate the source of the piping. It seemed above, below, and all around, of the very air itself. He shivered, going out upon the balcony. They were a long way from home. Yes, a long way, he thought. Never before had men been so far from home.

A snatch of song, men's voices in disharmony, came. Raccety hesitated. He needed a drink.

Came a step behind him, and Starkey, his thin young face carrying an odd expression.

"It's all wrong!" he said.

Raccety did not like the note in the other's voice. "Wrong? How, son?" he asked quietly.

Starkey shone his lamp around. His eyes were wide as those of a woman near hysteria. "Everything! Us! They're getting drunk and crying to go home. We're losing our nerve. We've come this far-- and are too scared to stay! We didn't expect a band and red-carpet reception, but -"

Raccety pressed his shoulder. "But nothing, son. Keep your head. It's strange here - it's alien. It's nothing to do with Earth. But don't worry. We're all right."

Starkey's lips twitched. "There's that damned piping! What is it? Where does it come from?"

He looked around as if trapped, white cheeks drawn in, eyes reflecting the light. A roar of laughter echoed through the halls, followed by the sound of breaking glass.

"Hear that?" he said. "Joe's getting drunk because he's afraid. Did you ever know Joe afraid before? Worse - he doesn't know what he's afraid of . . ."

He turned on one heel. Raccety watched his light bob from view. From the distance a bull-like voice began to roar.

"Come out, you damned Martians! We want to know what we're up against!" Something crashed. "I'll break your damn houses down, if I got to--"

The voice ceased and Raccety expelled his breath. Yes, Joe didn't know what he was afraid of. But he was afraid - in a blue funk of blustering terror. And behind the noise and the quietness there was always the piping, going on and on, a river of unending sound eternal as the dusty sand dunes.

Steps ran down into darkness on his right, and on impulse he descended. Rooms and halls lay below, almost filled with brown dust that had crept for uncounted ages through outer windows and doors. After an hour's exploration Raccety saw that his initial guess had been correct. The brown dust had descended into the valley. The sand-wagon had churned along streets filled to a height of many stories. Ah! but the city was old, he thought. Old. Old.

Somewhere above, a voice called his name. He answered, and Starkey slithered down into the dust-choked room.

"They're---taking the ship back," he said.

Raccety's pulse-beat quickened. "Impossible!"

"It's true!" A nervous hand seized his arm. "Joe suggested it. Wilson wouldn't hear of it. Berky thought it a good idea. They had a fight. They didn't know I was watching. Clay seemed undecided. 'You'll wait for the others?' he said. Joe wouldn't agree. 'To hell with the pair of them!' he said. 'I'm looking after myself. They must do the same.'"

"How long ago was that?"

"Half hour. Perhaps more. I didn't know where you'd gone."

"Why did you come after me?"

"Because I - I didn't want you left here. And they can't take the ship up without you -"

They can try, Raccety thought. Men that scared can try anything!

He turned Starkey round. "Thanks, son. Now run for it. I'll follow."

He did so, slowly. Thirty minutes were too long, he thought. Joe and the others could have loaded into the sand-wagon in five. Starkey had overlooked that.

He urged himself on over the loose dust, drifted in some places in sloping heaps from roof to floor. After a few minutes he knew that he had mistaken his direction, and was descending more deeply into the buried city. He sought a way back through the silted rooms, made an error, and found himself at a lower level than before.

Strange patterns decorated the walls, shining green, gold and silver under the beam of his lamp. Nothing showed what manner of beings had once lived there. He wondered if loneliness had encroached a little at a time, or if some great catastrophe had emptied the city. No one would ever know.

He emerged into an inner room, and halted. A great machine stood there. Crystal bars of many colours danced with wavering inner light. Many discs larger than a man could span rotated smoothly, each pierced with irregularly-spaced holes. Amid the centre of the whole a globe burned faintly blue.

Dumbfounded, Raccety stared. The wavering hues corresponded oddly with the piping that came and went in his ears . . . no, in his brain itself, he realised. The piping had not been sound. . .

Only after a very long time did he move. His throat was tight, as with regret at something immeasurably sad, yet unchangeable.

Stumbling, he searched for the way he had come, and at last heard a voice calling his name hysterically. Starkey emerged into the chamber where the empty bottles still lay, panic in his eyes.

"They've taken the sand-wagon -"

They went out on the balcony. The night was still, but not silent. It had never been silent, Raccety thought.

"How long since they took it?" he asked.

"It was gone when I came up from finding you."

"I see."

The lip of the valley was just visible against the sky. Beyond it was at least two miles of brown dust.

"They- they won't try to take her up," Starkey breathed.

Raccety was silent. Earth was man's to explore and to own, even to the nethermost corner, he thought. Mars was not man's. Man was an interloper. A stranger, out of his environment.

"Th-they won't try to take her up," Starkey repeated, his voice a tone higher and containing no note of hope.

"I fear they may," Raccety said quietly.

He listened to the wavering piping. Once had been beings who had loved it; now was only the stillness, and a half-dozen Earthmen who were alien to Mars ....

One of the moons had set. Abruptly, from beyond the rim of the valley, a rocket trail burned heavenwards. His breathing stilled, Raccety watched. The rocket trail wavered, staggering. It hung, then dropped from sight beyond the rim of the valley. Seconds passed and the earth shook. Blue flickered momentarily beyond the horizon. The air vibrated and some- where carved stone rattled, falling.

"They should never have tried to take her up," Starkey whispered.

Raccety stood listening to the piping. It wavered on and on, never ceasing. It was all around, as if suspended between earth and sky. Reed-like, woody, never harmonising, it fluted on.

"No, they shouldn't have tried," he said.

He wondered to what manner of being the piping had been as music, and what manner of being had played with the great instrument below ....