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Pied piper

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Never been reprint story

From astonishing stories

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The Prime Minister—and Field Marshal Yer, Doctor Groot's secretary was obviously excited.

Doctor Groot did not lift his eyes from the laboratory bench. With a gentle, steady grip he held a tiny furry animal while he shaved an area on its thigh.

"So? Have them wait."

"But Doctor, it's the—"

"Are they more important than this?" He reached for a hypodermic needle, loaded and waiting. His little specimen, a field mouse, did not resist the needle.

The secretary started to speak, bit her lip, and withdrew.

The statesman endured the wait somewhat better than the soldier. "I don't like this, Excellency," the field marshal grumbled. "Why should we be kept waiting while our host fiddles around among his stinks and bottles? Mind you, I'm not complaining on my own account; I learned to wait when I was a cadet; but you represent the state."

The Prime Minister twisted around in his chair to face Yer. "Patience, John. What does it matter if we are treated like job-seekers? We must have him to win the war, but does he need us? I doubt it from his viewpoint. Would you and I be here at all—if we were not already beaten."

The general turned a darker red. "With due respect to you, sir, our armies are not yet beaten."

"True. True," the statesman conceded testily, "but they will be in the end. You told me so."

The soldier muttered to himself.

"What," asked his companion, "did you say?"

"I said I would rather go down in honorable defeat."

"Oh, that! Of course you would. All your training is to fight. My anxiety is to win. That is the difference between politicians and soldiers—we know when to give way in order to win. Resign yourself to it; we must have the services of Doctor Groot in order to win this war!"

The soldier's answer was cut short by the secretary appearing to announce that Doctor Groot could now see them. She led the way, the politician followed; the soldier brought up the rear, still fuming. As they entered Groot's study, the doctor was entering it also, from the laboratory door on the far side.

His visitors saw a vigorous elderly man, a little below middle height, stocky and a bit full about the equator. Live, merry eyes peered out of a face appropriate to an old bull ape. This was surmounted by a pink, hairless dome of startling size. He was dressed in dirty linen pajamas and a rubber apron.

"Sit down," he said, waving them to big leather armchairs and seating himself in one, after pushing several books and assorted oddments to the floor to clear the chair. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but I was up to my eyes in some research that couldn't wait. But I found the answer to the problem."

The field marshal leaned forward eagerly. "You've found the weapon, Doctor?"

"The weapon? What weapon? I've found why field mice have herpies. Odd business—hysterical, just as in humans. I induced a neurosis; they responded by developing herpies. Quite interesting."

The soldier did not conceal his annoyance. "Field mice! Wasting time with such trifles! Man, don't you know there's a war?"

Groot lifted his shoulders a fraction of an inch. "Field mice; or field marshals, who shall say what is important? To me, all life is important, and interesting."

The Prime Minister interrupted suavely, "No doubt you are right, Doctor, but Field Marshal Yer and I are faced with another problem of paramount importance to us. The sound of battle hardly reaches the quiet of your laboratory, but for us who are charged with the public responsibility of prosecuting the war, there is no escaping it. We have come to you because we are at our wit's end and need the help of your genius. Will you give us that help?"

Groot pushed out his lips. "How can I help? You have hundreds of able research men in your laboratories. Why do you think that one old man can help you win a war."

"I am no expert in these things," replied the politician, "but I know your reputation. Everywhere among our experts and technical men I hear the same thing: 'If only Groot were here, he could do it.' ... 'Why isn't Doctor Groot called in on this?' They all seemed convinced that you can solve any problem you put your mind to."

"And what do you wish me to do?"

The Prime Minister turned to the soldier. "Tell him, John."

Rapidly Yer sketched out the progress of the war; the statistics of men and materials involved, the factors of supply and distribution, the techniques employed in fighting, the types of weapons; the strategical principles.

"So you see that even though we started practically equal in manpower and technical equipment, because of the enemy's greater reserves of capital goods, the tide has swung against us. Under the law of decrements, each battle leaves us worse off than before; the ratio against us has increased."

Groot considered this, then answered. "And the second differential is even worse, is it not so? The rate of increase of your losses climbs even more rapidly than the losses themselves. And it would seem from your figures that the third differential, the speed with which the rate is increasing spells disaster—you cannot even hold out until winter."

The field marshal admitted that such was true. "However," he added, "we have dug in and are holding the strategic situation practically static while we try to decide what to do about it. That is where you come in, Doctor; we need some radically new weapon or technique to change the ratio of losses to our favor, or the end is in sight. I can hold this situation together with very little change for six weeks or so. If you can go into your laboratory and produce some new and powerful weapon of offense in that length of time, you can save the country."

Groot looked at him quizzically. "So? What would you like? An incendiary ray from a portable projector, perhaps? Or how about a bomb that would not cease to explode, but would continue to destroy for days or weeks? Or perhaps you would like a means of disabling their aircraft in midair?"

The soldier nodded eagerly. "That's the idea, Doctor, any of those things. If you can do even one of them, you will be the greatest hero in the history of our country. But can you really give us such weapons?"

Groot nodded casually. "But certainly. Any of those things are obvious possibilities. You provide me with the money and help and I can deliver such weapons, or better ones, in fairly short order."

The politician intervened. "Anything you like, Doctor, anything at all. I shall direct the Secretary of the Exchequer to provide you with an unlimited drawing account. Any personnel you require will be ordered to report to you forthwith. Now suppose I leave you two to confer as to the most immediately important work to be done."

He arose and reached for his gloves and hat. "I may say, Doctor, that the reward will be commensurate with your service. Your country will not forget."

Groot motioned him back to his chair. "Don't be hasty, my friend. I did not say I would do these things. I said I could."

"Do you mean you might not—"

"In fact, I will not. I see no reason for helping you destroy our neighbor."

The field marshal was on his feet at once.

"This is treason," he raged. "Excellency, permit me to arrest him at once. I'll make him produce—or kill him in the process!"

Groot's tones were soft, mild. "Do you really think a man my age fears death? And let me tell you, my friend, a man with your blood pressure should not get into rages—it is quite likely to bring on a thrombosis, and result in your demise."

The politician's years of practice in controlling his temper and concealing his feelings stood him in good stead. He placed a hand on the marshal's shoulder. "Sit down, John, and be quiet. You know as well as I that we can't make Dr. Groot work, if he refuses. To talk of revenge on him is silly." He turned to Groot. "Doctor, when your fellow countrymen are dying to

accomplish a particular end. Don't you think you owe them some explanation if you refuse to help them in any way you can?"

Groot had watched the little by-play with amusement. He replied courteously, "Certainly, Your Excellency. I will not assist in this mass killing because I see no reason why either side should win. The cultures are similar; the racial stocks are the same in about the same proportions. What difference will it make which side wins?"

"Don't you feel any obligation of patriotism, or loyalty?"

"Only," Groot shrugged, "to the race itself. Not to a particular gang."

"I don't suppose it would do any good to discuss with you the question of which side is morally justified?"

Groot shook his head. "None at all, I'm afraid."

"I thought not. We are realists, you and I." He gathered up his gloves again. "I shall do what I can,

Doctor, to protect you from the results of your decision, but political necessities may force my hand.

You will understand."

"Stay." Groot stopped him again. "I refused to help you win this war. Suppose I undertook to keep you from losing?"

"But that is the same thing," exploded the field marshal.

The Prime Minister simply raised his brows.

Groot proceeded. "I will not help you to win. But if you wish it, I will show you how to stop this war with no victory on either side, provided—" He paused—"provided you agree now to my kind of peace."

He stopped and waited for the effect of his words. The Prime Minister nodded. "Go ahead. We will at least listen."

"If the war is finished with no victor and no vanquished, if the terms of the peace set up a new government which welds the two countries into one nation, indistinguishable, free, and equal, I shall be satisfied. If you can assure me of that, I will help you—otherwise not."

The politician withdrew to the far end of the room, and stood staring out the window. He traced a triangle with his forefinger on his right cheek, and repeated it, endlessly; his brows furrowed in thought.

The old soldier got up and joined him and expostulated in whispers, "-utopian! ... impractical! ... different languages, different traditions ..."

The politician left the soldier abruptly and faced the scientist. "I agree to your terms, Doctor, What do you, plan to do?"

"First you answer a question for me. Why are men willing to fight and die in a war?"

"Why? For their country, for patriotic reasons. Oh, I suppose a few regard it as an adventure."

"No reason is necessary for the men themselves," put in the field marshal, "under compulsory service. They *have* to."

"But even under compulsory service," said Groot, "there must be good morale, a willingness to die fighting, else you would be faced with chronic mutiny. Not so?"

"Mmmm-well, yes. You're right."

"Doctor, why do you think men are willing to die in war?" inquired the Prime Minister.

Groot answered solemnly, "To be willing to die in war has nothing to do with personal self-preservation. To go to war is suicide—for the individual. Men are willing to be killed in war for one reason only—that their tribe may live after them. That is to say, they fight for their children. To a nation without children, war is meaningless, not worth fighting. That is a primary datum of mass psychology!"

"Go on."

"I propose that we kidnap their children!"

"It's an infamous scheme. I will not agree to it."

"It is humane."

"It is contrary to international law."

"Naturally. International law defines the legal ways to kill men. This proposes an illegal way to avoid killing them."

"It violates every rule of civilized warfare!"

"Quiet, John! You'll do as you are told."

Deep behind the enemy's lines in a moderate-sized city, life flowed quietly along. True, there were few men on the streets, and those few usually showed the marks of battle. The motorbusses were driven by women; the clerks were women; even the street sweepers and rubbish collectors were women. On a hill at the outskirts of town, there stood a large boarding school, an orphanage for the children of the war dead. Here matriarchy was the natural thing.

It was recess time. The pleasant, gardened grounds swarmed and boiled with young life. Their high young voices were raised in shouts and calls that attend the age-old games of childhood tag, ball games and the like.

In her private office, Madame Curan, superintendent, pored over her reports. The voices of the children outside reached her as a wordless, tuneless obligato, which she heard subconsciously and responded to by relaxing the tired wrinkles between her eyes.

She pushed a stack of papers to one side, and pressed a button. The outer office door opened almost at once, and she glanced up to find, not the stenographer she had rung for, but her second-in-command. The woman was plainly excited.

"Madame! Air raid!"

Madame Curan's finger was at once on another button. Asiren mourned, and the shouts of the children were snuffed out.

"Are you sure?" she asked her assistant as they hurried out. "I don't understand it. They've never raided schoolhouses before."

Out on the grounds the children had formed into four queues and were being hurried down four covered ramps which led underground. The playground supervisors, young widows, most of them with a too bitter knowledge of war, were urging them on.

Madame Curan glanced up. Settling out of the sky was a huge helicopter of bombing type. It was attended by a dancing, swooping swarm of little fighting planes. Three little white clouds appeared suddenly among the planes, then a few seconds later the breeze brought three short dry coughs. The

Anti-aircraft batteries had open up.

Her assistant clutched at her arm.

"Where are our planes?"

"There they come."

Three tiny specks, higher than the enemy, burst out of the glare of the sun from the southwest. They dropped their V formation, shifted into open column, and dived at full throttle, disregarding the convoying fighting planes in their eagerness to reach the big bomber. The bomber jerked away to the east, like a humming bird shifting to another blossom. But the column followed. It was plain that the lead pilot intended to suicide by diving into the bomber.

One of the fast little fighters of the convoy beat him to it. The two planes, defend and convoy, collided a short distance over the helicopter. They seemed to disintegrate noiselessly into disorganized rubbish.

The other two planes in the column ducked, one under, one over the floating rubbish. And passed harmlessly beyond the bomber. A few seconds later came the sound of the collision—the noise of a giant tearing a thousand yards of muslin.

The helicopter landed on the playground.

From the control cabin on the port side forward, a small door opened, a light metal ladder swung down, and two men debarked. They approached the woman. The younger of two men addressed them.

"Madame Curan' is it not? I am Lieutenant Bunes. Allow me to present Flight Commander Dansic. I will translate for him."

"It is not necessary. I know your language. What is the meaning of this cowardly attack?"

The commander saluted smartly, and made a slight bow from the waist. "Please Madame. I am so happy that you speak our language. It will make everything so much simpler. I regret to inform you that you are my prisoner."

"Obviously."

He smiled as if she had been exceptionally witty. "Yes, of course. You and your assistants I am forced to require a certain service of you."

"I shall not help you!"

"Please, Madame." It will not be anything you do not wish to do. You will simply continue with your present duties of caring for children back to my country. You will be needed to care for them.."

"I will not! I shall tell them to resist. You cannot possibly control three thousand children."

He shrugged his shoulders, "as you like, Madame. Did I not promise that you would not be required to do anything that do not wish to do?"

While they were talking, a great door opened from the fat body of the aircraft, swung down like a draw-bridge, and a dozen men trotted out at double time. They broke into two single file columns and deployed rapidly around the buildings until they completely surrounded the school at fifty-yard intervals. Each carried a large tripod and had a pack slung on his back.

Once at their posts, they set up the tripods, unslung the packs, clamped them hastily on the tripods, and stripped and stripped the covers from the packs. Then each one grasped the end of a reel of wire which was slung on his tripod, trotted away a counter-clockwise direction toward next adjacent tripod, paying out the wire as he ran. Each man clamped the end his wire to the tripod of his left-hang neighbor, and ran quickly back to his post.

A non-commissioned officer standing at the helicopter door bellowed, "Report!"

"One!" "Two!" "Three!" "Four!" "Five!" "Six!" "Seven!" "Eight!" "Nine!" "Ten!" "Eleven!" "Twelve!"

The non-commissioned officer brought his right hand down smartly.

Nothing much happened. The trees and buildings beyond the line of tripods shimmered slightly as if seen through a soap bubble film. But a motorcycle squad of civic guards came charging up the boulevard from the city a moment later, and crashed into this iridescent phantom. They piled up in a tangled, sickening heap.

Inside the helicopter a young technician sat before a complex control board, his bony, nervous hands busy with knurled levers, a triple bank of numbered keys, and numerous switches. His eyes followed the responses on the instrument panel back of the control board, noting the readings shown by quivering needles, watched the wandering of the little lighted "bugs" in the zero readers, saw the ready lights flash on.

A green light flashed near the top of the panel. He pulled a screen down in front of his face and threw a switch. A picture rapidly built up on the screen of another pale-faced nervous man. The picture spoke

"Hi, Jan. Ready on your side?"

"Yeah. I'll give you a stand-by warning."

"I don't like this, Jan."

"Neither do I. I'll run any machine that they put in front of me, but I prefer to take 'em apart first and see what makes 'em tick."

"Right. How the hell do I know what goes on back of that board? I'm just punching keys in the dark. Besides, how do we know those kids won't be hurt? Nobody has ever seen this gadget in operation."

A shadow fell across the board. The technician looked up and saw the noncommissioned officer gesturing to him. He spoke again to the panel.

Stand by! We're starting the music." He pressed three buttons in rapid succession.

The music reached the four standing on the grounds; Madame Curan, nervous and defiant; her assistant, frightened and looking for guidance; the commander and his aide, urbane and alert. It tinkled in their ears like a child's song. It sang to them of a child's cosmos, a child's heaven, wonderful, free from care.

Dansic smiled at Madame Curan. "Is it not silly to be at war when there is music like that in the world?"

In spite of herself she smiled back.

The music swelled and developed a throbbing almost below the audible range. Then a thin reedy piping was distinguishable. It wove in and out of the melody, embroidered it, and took it over. Come away, it said. *Come away with me.* It was piercing, but not painful-it seemed to vibrate in the very brain itself. ;

The children boiled up out of the underground ramps like so many puppies. They laughed and shouted and ran in circles. They rushed out of the ground and danced towards the helicopter. Up the incline they jostled, pushing and giggling.

The technician took a quick look over his shoulder, and barked, "Here they come!"

He threw a switch, and an empty frame beside the control board, six feet high, suddenly filled with opaque, velvet blackness.

The first of the children skipped up to the frame, jumped into it and disappeared.

Commander Dansic led Madame Curan into the helicopter as the last of the children were entering. She suppressed a scream when she saw what was happening to her charges, and turned furiously at the commander. But he silenced her with a wave of his hand.

"Regard, please."

Following the direction of his pointing finger, she saw, framed in the television panel, a screen similar to the one in which she stood, except that in the picture the children were popping out of a frame of blackness.

"Where are they? What have you done with them?"

"They are in my country-safe."

The last of the staff of the school was persuaded or coerced into passing through the blackness; the helicopter crew followed, two at a time. Finally the commander was left alone, save for the technician, with Madame Curan. He turned to her and bowed.

"And now, Madame, will you come with me and resume your duties to your wards?" He offered her the crook of his right elbow.

She bit her lip, then grasped the proffered arm. They marched steadily into the black.

The technician pulled off his earphones, made some last adjustments, and faced the framed darkness. He entered it with the air of a man about to take a cold shower.

Fifteen seconds later the packs on the circle of tripods blew up in a series of overlapping little pops. Ten seconds after, that the helicopter blossomed into a giant mushroom, with a dull *whooo-hooom* that shook the ground.

The two technicians need not have worried about the safety of the children. Back deep in the territory

of their home country, Doctor Groot sprawled in a chair and watched the arrival of one consignment of children,

A small, warm smile lightened his ugly Face, induced by the sound of the unearthly music perhaps, or possibly by the sight of so many happy children. The Prime Minister stood near him, too nervous to sit down.

Groot crooked a finger at an elderly gray-haired female in the white uniform of a chief nurse. "Come here, Eida."

"Yes, Doctor."

"You must see to the music yourself. Reduce the volume now to the least that will keep them quiet, free from tears. Put them to sleep with it tonight. But no music-this sort of music-tomorrow, unless absolutely necessary. It is not good for them, to be happy as angels too long. They have still to be men and women."

"I understand, Doctor."

"See that they all understand." He turned to the Prime Minister, who pulled at his lip and looked distraught. "What is worrying you, my friend?"

"Well- Are you sure no harm can come to these children?"

"Do you not see?" Groot waved a hand at the frolicsome children, being herded in little groups to the quarters prepared for them.

"Yes-but suppose two of your receiving stations were tuned in the same fashion. What would happen to the children?"

Groot smiled. "You are confusing this with radio. My fault, perhaps. I called it mass-radio when speaking of it. But it is nothing of the sort. It is-how are you in mathematics?"

The Prime Minister made a grimace.

"Very well, then," continued Groot, "I cannot answer you properly. But I can tell you this: Those children were not broadcast like radio waves. They simply stepped through a door. It is as if I took that door." He pointed to one in the end of the hall- "and twisted this building so that it fitted up against the door." He pointed to another on the other end of the hall. "I have tampered a little, oh, such a very little, with world lines, and pinned a piece of space to another piece of space with which it was not normally in contact." He pointed to the mass-radio receiver present with them in the room. "That is one end of my pin. You understand?"

"Well-not entirely."

Groot nodded. "I did not expect you to. I did not truly explain it. Without the language of tensor calculus it cannot be explained; I can only tell you an allegory."

An orderly trotted up and handed Groot a sheaf of reports. Groot glanced at them "Two more stations and we shall be ready for the shield. Have you wondered how that worked, too?"

The statesman admitted that he had.

"It is the same thing and yet different," said Groot. "This time we lock the door, very softly. The world lines are given a gentle twist and mass will not pass along them. But pshaw! Those are monkey tricks, mere gadgets, and complex, as they seem to the layman. But the music now that is another matter. There we tamper with the powers of heaven itself, which is why I am so careful with it."

The Prime Minister was surprised and said so. He had been impressed by the engineering miracles. The use of music he regarded as a harmless crotchet of Groot's.

"Oh, no," said Groot. "No. No indeed. Have you ever, thought about music? Why is music? What is it? Can you define it?"

"Why-uh-music is certain rhythmical arrangements of sounds which produce emotional responses-"

Groot held up a hand. "Yes, but what arrangements? And what emotions? And why? Never mind. I have analyzed the matter. And now I hold the secret of Orpheus' lute, the magic of the Pied Piper."

He lowered his voice. "It is a serious matter, friend - a dangerous matter. These other toys will go to state, but this one secret I keep always to myself-and try to forget."

The orderly hurried up again, and handed him another report. Groot looked at it and passed it over to the Prime Minister.

"Time," he said. "They are all back. We will set the shield."

A few minutes later the lead wires of some thousands of tripods, spaced equally along four hundred and seventy miles of battlefield, were joined. Telephonic reports were relayed to

GHQ, two switches were thrown, and a shimmering intangible screen separated the opposing armies.

The war was *over-de facto*.

OFFICIAL PRIORITY MESSAGE

FROM: PRIME MINISTER

TO: CHANCELLOR

VIA: NEUTRAL LIAISON

EXCELLENCY, YOU ARE AWARE THAT HOSTILITIES HAVE CEASED BECAUSE OF OUR DEFENSIVE SCREEN. WE HOLD THREE HUNDRED FIFTY-SEVEN THOUSAND AND TWELVE OF YOUR CHILDREN AS HOSTAGES. PLEASE SEND OBSERVERS UNDER FLAG OF TRUCE TO ASSURE YOU OF THEIR WELL-BEING. WE ARE PREPARED TO MAINTAIN STATUS QUO INDEFINITELY. WE ARE READY TO TREAT WITH YOU FOR AN EQUITABLE PEACE WITHOUT VICTORY TO REPLACE PRESENT DE FACTO ARMISTICE.

SIGNED AND SEALED BY THE

PRIME MINISTER

On the eleventh day of the peace conference, the chancellor asked for a recapitulation of the points agreed on. The chief clerk complied.

"First consideration: It is agreed that henceforth the two subscribing nations are one nation. Dependent considerations:" The clerk droned on. "The two parliaments were to meet together, pending a census and a constitutional convention. The currencies were to be joined, and so forth, and so forth. It was provided that the war orphans in each territory were to be reared in the land of the former enemy, and that subsidies were to be provided to encourage marriages, which would mingle the blood of the former two countries.

The armies were to be demobilized and a corps of technical experts were to be trained in the use of the new defensive weapons developed by Doctor Groot.

Doctor Groot himself lolled in a chair near the middle of the horseshoe of desks. When the clerk had concluded, the Prime Minister and the chancellor looked at Groot.

"Well, he said testily, when the pause had grown, "let's sign it and go home. The rest is routine."

"Had you considered," observed the chancellor, "that this new nation we have created must have a head; a chief executive?"

"What of it?"

"I cannot be it, nor can it be-" he bowed to the Prime Minister-"my honorable friend."

"Well! Pick one!"

"We have. There is only one man universally trusted here. He and no other will do, if this agreement is to be more than a scrap of paper. And that one is yourself, Doctor."

At this, the field marshal arose at his place at the head of his nation's table of military officials.

"Stop!" he shouted. "There is no need to go further with this fool's play. I shall not stand by while my country is dishonored and prostituted." He clapped his hands together. As if prearranged, two officers left the table, ran to the horseshoe and grasped Groot on each side.

"You are relieved of office, Mr. Prime Minister. I shall conduct the affairs of our country until the war is over. Safe conduct will be provided for the representatives of the enemy. Hostilities will be resumed at once. And that-" he pointed at Dr. Groot and bristled in rage-"that meddler must be removed — completely."

Groot sat quietly, making no attempt to resist his captors. But under the table, his shoe pressed down on a button concealed in the rug. In another room some relays clicked.

And the music started.

Not children's music this time. No, rather the *Ride of the Valkyrie*, the *Marseillaise*. Not these exactly, but rather that quality of each, and of every martial song, that promises men Valhalla after battle.

The field marshal heard it and stopped in his tracks; his fine old head reared up, listening. The two officers grasping Groot heard it, and dropped his arms. One by one almost every one of the uniformed men stood up and quested for the sound. Here and there an occasional Frock-coated dignitary joined them. Almost immediately they formed a column of fours and swung away down the great hall, their heels pounding to two-four time.

At the end of the hall a tapestry swung aside and revealed ... nothingness ... nothingness, in a large frame. '.

The column marched into the blackness. When the last man had disappeared, Groot released the pressure from the button. The blackness vanished, leaving an empty frame, with the wall just beyond it. A murmur of expelled breath filled the room.

The Prime Minister turned to Groot and dabbed at his brow with a fine linen handkerchief. "Good God, man, where have you sent them?"

Groot shook his head. "I am sorry. I do not know."

"You don't know?"

"No. You see, I anticipated some trouble, but did not have time to fasten the other end of my 'pin'."

The Prime Minister was horror-stricken.

"Poor old John," he muttered.

Groot nodded soberly. "Yes. I am sorry I had to do it. Poor old John. He was such a good man-I liked him so very much."