

THE TOWN MUSICIANS OF NAARICH**by Bill McGuire**

The New Year's Day storm was the last straw. It was the third occasion in less than six months that the salt pans had been laid waste and this time there was no way back. The spume-laden winds had driven before them a massive surge that had overwhelmed the lagoons, destroyed the harvesting machinery and the warehouses and battered the workers shanty town into matchwood. More than half of the indentured labourers and their families had been killed, and those that remained were left with nothing but the sodden rags they stood up in.

The following morning a blazing sun in a blue, rain-washed, sky looked down on the small band of survivors called together by Mr. John, the owner of the salt manufactory. Most were men. The women and children had been inside the shacks when the surge struck and few had survived. The men had been working on the pans, and although many had drowned, some had managed to make it to the safety of the great dunes that enclosed the evaporating lagoons. There were about thirty survivors in all. They stood with their arms at their sides, several clutching the wide-brimmed hats worn as protection from the sun's enervating heat. They

looked not at Mr. John, but cast their eyes downwards, seemingly studying the debris-strewn sand.

Mr. John cleared his throat. He was a fat man - a rare sight indeed in these times. The armpits of his safari jacket were marked by dark stains and he mopped his brow with a red silk handkerchief as the building heat nurtured sprouting beads of sweat. He had good news, he told them, from the upturned crate upon which he stood. They were free. There was little reaction to the news. A few shuffled their feet, but they had learned to their cost never to speak in Mr. John's presence. No-one even looked up. They kept their eyes downcast, occasionally sneaking a sideways glance at one of the cattle-prod wielding overseers who corralled the group. A sickly-looking child enveloped in the arms of an old man, squealed momentarily, but was calmed by the man's whispered endearments.

The sound of Mr. John rapping his thigh with his silver-topped prod was the only sound that broke the silence. He seemed to be at a loss about what to do next. Then, when it became clear that his magnanimous gesture was to be greeted neither with enthusiasm nor – indeed – any sign at all, he gave a tight smile and signalled over the head's of the labourers to the overseers. Turning away from the gathering, he stepped down and waddled along the path through the dunes that led

to the track where four battered jeeps were parked. The overseers followed in single file, the last man walking backwards and pointing a machine pistol at the assembly until he disappeared from sight. There was a sound of clattering engine parts then, as the drivers started up the jeeps, and a savoury odour as the recycled cooking oil powered the vehicles forward.

No-one moved or spoke until the noise of the retreating jeeps had faded. Only then, did a murmur of subdued conversation intrude upon the swashing sound of the distant waves. The assembly broke up. People formed small clumps that separated to make new associations that disbanded in turn; singletons bounced back and forth amongst the groups like atoms in a cloud of gas. Here and there – amidst the hubbub - individuals sat or stood; alone, friendless and bereft.

Lexy dragged his eyes from a bent old woman shivering beneath black rags despite the sun's heat. Husband and son taken by the surge, he had no doubt that Mr. John's announcement had sounded the death knell for her and for many of those left behind. There had been no pity, no generosity of spirit, in his final act. It had been a strictly commercial decision. The frequent storms had simply become too much, the near-continuous repairing and rebuilding making the manufactory unsustainable. He had others – better placed, more

sheltered from the periodic surges. He would expand these to make up for the loss of this one. With no work, no shelter and no food, most of the survivors would likely starve, but that wasn't his concern. It was nothing personal. Business was business.

'So, what now boss?'

Lexy turned and looked down at an upturned face, furrowed and burnt nut-brown by the sun. The glittering black eyes looked out from deep pits of shadow, the small mouth partly open in a toothless gape. The tiny man barely came up to Lexy's waist, but he was almost as broad as he was tall, and the arms that sprouted through ragged holes in his shirt were muscled like a wrestlers. In his right hand, he clutched a rough-made flute – now his only possession.

Lexy shrugged, then raised his eyes again to scan the horizon, as if looking for inspiration.

'There's nothing for us here now, Prince. We have to go.'

Maybe the dwarf had acquired his name because he was the exact opposite of what a Prince might be expected to look like, but nobody had dared ask. Now he nodded at Lexy's edict and signalled to a man standing nearby, a young woman sitting cross-legged on the sand at his feet. The woman stood and they both came over. The man was called Pop – also for reasons unknown. Fair of skin and red of hair, he was not designed for working long hours in the sun. He had a large, bulbous, nose from which, periodically, flakes of

burned epidermis drifted like dandruff. His skin was pale, but across his cheeks and arms, freckles had merged to form patches of near-continuous red. His flaming hair, shot with grey, was long, but tied up in a bun and stuffed beneath the wide-brimmed hat he could never afford to be without. The matching straggly beard reached almost to his waist. He was extremely tall, and thin to the point of emaciation.

The woman had no name, or at least had never admitted or answered to one. She was half Pop's age and might have been his daughter, though she wasn't. She was gamine and deeply tanned. Well muscled and sinewy, she looked out on the world through bright blue eyes set in a long, thin, face and slitted against the sun. Both wore the standard knee-length ragged trews of the salt pan labourer. Neither wore footwear of any sort. Like all who worked the evaporation lagoons, their feet were hardened almost to stone by the salt. The man carried a small drum, made of skin drawn across a framework of driftwood. The woman grasped a hand-crafted fiddle and bow that had seen far better days. The pair joined Prince and all three waited patiently in Lexy's shadow for him to speak.

He was something of an oddity amongst the labourers, having come to the camp as a youth, traded for hack silver by an old couple at their wit's end. By virtue of his experience of the world beyond the camp, Lexy was venerated by those

who had known nothing else. Despite the frugal diet, he was a huge man, which attracted a mix of respect and awe from the labourers, but also – inevitably – the attention and hostility of the overseers. In order to survive, Lexy had learned early on to keep his head down and to say as little as possible. Prince had been instrumental, taking him under his wing and tempering teenaged anger and angst that could quite easily have seen him strung up within days of arrival. It was Prince who inducted Lexy into the ways of the camp; what to do and what not to do; who was trouble and who wasn't. As memories of his father faded, it was Prince who took his place. Now well into his third decade, it was to Prince that Lexy owed everything.

He looked down now with fondness on the little man and nodded to Pop and his nameless companion. He was glad they had all survived. Music had brought them together and kept them together. During the blistering nights, when sleep was impossible, they had played to keep everyone's spirits up and hope alive. Hope in what, no-one was sure, but the music made everyone feel better – at least for a time.

'There's a town not too far from here. I remember we stopped off there before....' Lexy struggled for the words.

'....before I came. Naarich, I think it's called.' He hefted his pipes in one hand. 'I thought maybe we could play. For food like.'

Pop looked less than convinced and made a face. He worked his cracked lips – as if preparing them - before speaking 'How far?'

Lexy frowned, trying to recall memories that he had intentionally buried deep. 'Three days walk – maybe four.'

Pop worked his lips again. 'And what do we eat? How do we feed ourselves on the journey?'

Lexy shrugged, but had no answer. Prince, ever supportive, came to his aid.

'There's no food here either. Stay if you wish and starve slowly, or come with us and try your luck. There is no other choice.'

The girl touched Pop's arm and he bent down so she could whisper in his ear. She was a marvel on the fiddle, but never spoke out loud or to anyone other than Pop.

Pop stood upright. He still didn't look pleased, but he nodded. 'We will come.'

The four wound their way through the other survivors, some still talking quietly in groups, others sitting or lying on the sand. No-one took any notice as they headed towards the path through the dunes that led to the track, and they didn't look back.

The battlements of the cloud castles were bruised purple and black, heralding the evening downpour that helped dissipate the day's grinding heat and humidity. Before them, they watched - mouths open - as the blinding light of the setting

sun at their backs bounced off a wall of water surging westwards. They stood at the southern edge of a finger of the sea that pointed far inland. Long ago, when the heat came and the seas rose up, the salt water overwhelmed the meres and freshwater lakes that had occupied the subdued topography and now the sea reached as far as Naarich. The tidal bore was commonplace to those who knew it, roaring inland twice a day. But to Lexy and his companions, it was something marvellous and unexplained, and they followed its course until it merged into the gloom of the coming dusk.

Lexy moved off then, the others trudging behind. It was their second day on the road and they were bone-tired. They had kept to the track that followed the southern edge of the narrow bay. Even so, the going had been hard, run-off from the daily rainstorms chopping the surface into a mosaic of deep fissures that turned ankles and gouged shins. They were famished too. Some small, wrinkled, fruit, scavenged from a stand of moribund orange trees had kept them going and accumulated rainwater had held thirst at bay. But they desperately needed something more to give them the energy to keep moving.

They had encountered no-one on the track, a shoal of small fishing boats flitting past at the height of the previous evening's rainstorm providing the only sign of life. It was a surprise,

therefore, when - as thunder crashed at their backs and the skies opened – the outline of a building emerged from the rainy murk, the flicker of candlelight in the windows. More often than not, people meant bad news, so the four drew closer warily. A small copse of stunted palms to one side offered shelter and they made for this. The building had two stories – almost unknown these days – and was well made. The walls were built from chalk blocks and must have been centuries old. They had been repaired in places and the original roof had been replaced by sheets of corrugated iron, but the work had been well done. The place looked watertight and welcoming. While the others crouched beneath the dripping branches, Prince crept closer until he could steal a glance through one of the downstairs windows. After a time, he moved on to the next, then vanished around a corner. Minutes later, he reappeared, having circumnavigated the building, and made a dash for the trees, scuttling in a low crouch through the deluge. He looked excited.

'Mr. John and three of the overseers.' He paused to wipe at his dripping face. 'There are two jeeps parked round the back. The others must have gone on ahead.'

Lexy and Pop were startled by the news and the girl made whimpering noises. She had been a favourite of Mr. John a while back, before she had bitten a chunk out of his arm. They had staked her out on the sand then, dawn 'til dusk – no water. She had been lucky to survive. Very

lucky. Why Mr. John would stop here they couldn't imagine and they wasted a few minutes discussing possibilities, before Lexy raised both hands in exasperation.

'It doesn't matter why he's here. Question is, what are we going to do about it?'

John Thaxton blew out the candle on the windowsill and peered out, long, pointed nose almost touching the chill glass. It was nearly dark and the rain had at last stopped its mind-numbing clattering on the iron-clad roof. Now the water that had fallen was evaporating fast from the hot ground. It formed a thick mist that drifted in from the salt marshes bordering the south side of the bay, hugging the ground and swirling around the building. Mr John shivered. It wasn't cold, but this place gave him the creeps. He was familiar with the tales of the dead, whose spirits haunted the marshes when the moon was full. He didn't believe them, of course, but, well..... you could never be really sure could you? He turned back to the dimly lit room as if for reassurance. Three of his men were sprawled on battered, overstuffed, chairs, two asleep and snoring, the other fiddling with the broken strap of his machine pistol. Mr. John grimaced. He hated the place and was desperate to get out, but it served a purpose. His grimace turned to an indulgent smile as he thought of the wheeling and dealing he had done there over the years; the money he had made; the people he had screwed over.

He turned back to the window and squinted hopefully into the blackness. Where the fuck was the Colonel? He was a full day late now. It just wasn't good enough. Not good enough at all. If it hadn't been for the prospect of closing the biggest deal of his life, he would have been out of there long ago. No-one made him twiddle his thumbs like this. No-one. Then again, the Colonel wasn't no-one. He was someone – someone big. Control of the salt market in Lundun had made him unimaginably rich and immensely powerful, and Mr. John wanted a bit of that. If he could get the Colonel to take his salt he was made, guaranteed a market big enough to take everything he could produce and more.

Delusions of grandeur were beginning to blossom in his head, when he became aware of lights outside. His first thought was that they were headlights, that the Colonel had come at last. Excitement began to build, then turned quickly to anxiety as the mist parted to unmask a baleful, yellow moon and - out on the waters of the bay - it's fluttering reflection. At the same moment, a blood-curdling wail sounded close by. On and on it went, echoing out across the water. Mr. John stood transfixed, the hairs on the back of his neck standing to attention. Behind him, he could hear his men scrabbling for their weapons and turning saw terror in their eyes. They were local lads and none too bright. He could see that they knew the stories, been raised on them, had swallowed them

wholesale. Just then the wail sounded again, this time joined by an awful screeching, like the death throws of a stuck piglet. The men panicked then, grabbing their guns and making for the door. Mr. John crossed the room in an attempt to head them off, blocking the doorway and putting out an arm. They stopped in their tracks, unsure of what to do.

'Lads, lads. Calm down. It's nothing – just the wind.'

He didn't believe it himself, so didn't hold out much hope that they would. Then there came another sound. This time a slow thump – thump, thump – thump, thump – thump, like the steady pounding of a funeral drum. It was the last straw. The man in front yelled in horror and swung a ham-sized fist at Mr. John's face, which knocked him to the ground and had him seeing stars. In seconds, they were through the door and into the hallway. Mr. John shook his head to clear it. At the same time he became aware of a ghostly ululation, a pulsing cadence that chilled him to the core. He swallowed hard, rationality beginning to fade, dread building. Then the sound was drowned out by the noise of an engine turning over, and he struggled to rise. He still felt groggy, and managed only to drag himself up onto all fours, head drooping between his arms, belly touching the floor, blood from his shattered nose dripping onto the threadbare carpet.

'No! Lads. Don't leave me.' He shouted at the floor. His throat was dry and his voice weak. There was the slamming of doors, then the

crunching of gears and a grating screech as one of the jeeps made off. Mr. John hauled himself to his feet, one arm holding onto the door jamb for support. He was dripping with cold sweat and his chins wobbled as he cried out again in despair.

'Nooooo.....Please. Come back!'

The screech of another engine pushed to its limits announced the departure of the second jeep. Then there was silence. Mr. John slumped to the ground, sobbing, the tears mingling with the dribble of blood from his nose. For a long time he sat on the floor, unmoving. Then, aware that the sounds of the tormented souls had ceased, he pulled himself upright once more and stumbled into the hall. The outside door was open and, uncertain of what to do next, he ventured – tentatively - out into the night.

The moon, was high in the sky now, casting the landscape into a mosaic of black and silver. Mr. John's attention was attracted to the silhouette of a large boulder a few yards away. He didn't remember seeing it as they arrived. When the boulder moved and resolved itself into a tiny man, he opened his mouth to scream. But it was a sound that never came. A thin but sinewy arm reached from behind and a hand clamped over his mouth, pulling his head back. The slim-bladed knife slipped easily between his ribs and into his heart, which fibrillated momentarily, then stopped. The girl released her grip, stepped back and let the lifeless body of Mr. John slump to the ground.

Prince joined her then and they stood for a moment looking down at the pudgy face, glistening in the moonlight. Then the girl hawked and spat on the bloodied corpse.

The melancholy skirl of pipes greeted the appearance of the sun. A gusting breeze carried the wistful notes far across the sparkling waters of the bay, piquing the interest of a black-sailed trading wherry that came close to the shore, its occupants waving a greeting before heading on down the coast. Lexy had parked himself on a small rock to watch the sun come up. Now he took the reed from his mouth and turned as the others came to join him. In their hands, they carried their musical instruments. No-one spoke and for a time they just watched the wherry and kept their own council. Eventually, Prince broke the silence.

'So. Do we stay or do we go?'

Lexy grinned at him. 'Well, there are four walls and a roof, and there's food and water. I'm happy with that.'

Prince nodded his agreement. Lexy squinted up at Pop's piebald face and waited. Pop was working his mouth, preparing his reply, when the girl plucked at his sleeve and he bent to catch her whisper, then straightened. His face became distorted then, and Lexy realised, after a moment, that he was smiling.

'She likes it here and so do I. We vote to stay.'

Lexy beamed back, 'then, my friends,' he said, turning again to look out over the sparkling blue waters of the bay. 'Naarich must wait a little longer to savour our particular talents.'

With a nod to the popular fairy tale *The Town Musicians of Bremen*, retrieved and recorded by the Brothers Grimm and first published in Grimms' Fairy Tales in 1819.