

The Town on the Edge of the End



Millions of years ago in the Land of Tomorrow and the Next Day there was a town, a tiny town, that might have been bonny and bright, but it was sorrowed and sore with a night that stretched through its days.

The night was a sadness and a black shadow made of many shades, a gloom cast by the presence of monsters.



They hung about in the trees and in the eaves. Some were goblins, short ones and fat, tall ones with a hungry look. Some were fiends with smoking hair and scaly hands, greedy lips and gritty smiles. There were smirking

spiders and flat, round dragons, like pancakes, filling the fields. Great greasy toads sat in the doorways, trading maggots and swapping flies. The market was a snarl of snakes and nameless niddings.



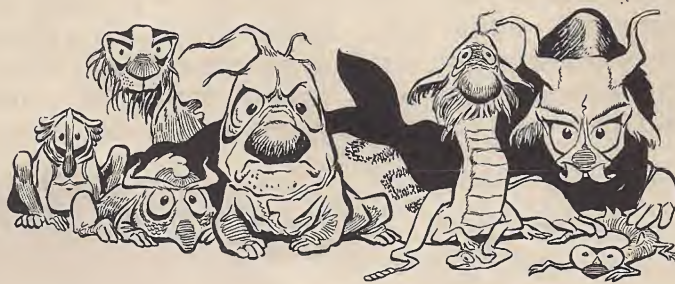
Food was snatched from the fork. Bed was impossible. The people of the town spent much time burning incense and muttering magic incantations, but the magic seemed

to work badly. The plague of demons grew worse. Beating on pans did no good. An age old remedy for the horrors it was, but now no good.



Mighty speeches by men of government and stern proclamations by the Mayor against the slithering horde were listened to by the people.

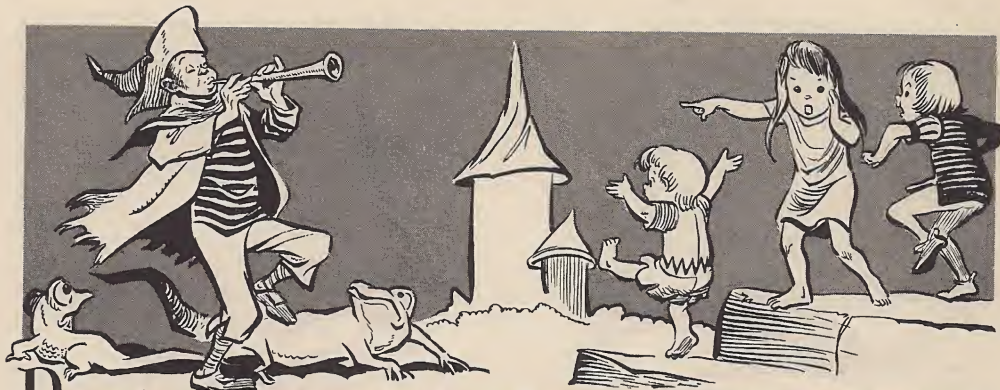
These strong words caused the people to quake and children slumbering fitfully on their mothers' shoulders woke screaming and with the hiccups.



But not a round-eyed monster blinked.



Then one morning when the sun shone everywhere else, a fluting was heard along the ridge. Such goblins as had ears pricked them up and stopped chewing. The people of the town, tumbling over toads, rushed from their houses and looked to the hills.



Down the mountain road, picking his way between the flopping black things, there stepped a piper. His notes looped and soared and

seemed to lift him over the gloom. The shadows seemed to part. Children with old tears still wet, laughed and clapped their hands.



Straight to the Mayor he strode. He flourished the pipe from his lips and bowed. "Greetings, sir," he cried. "You should be rid of these dragons."

The Mayor, combing lizards from his beard, replied, "We know." "I shall take them away for you," declared the Piper.



A wombat leaped from beneath the Mayor's coat. The poor man shook a nest of salamanders out of his pocket and sighed. "How?"



"With my pipe." "If you do," grunted the weary Mayor. "You can name your own price."



The Piper ejected a small beast that had burrowed into his pipe. He eyed the Mayor sternly. *My price is a promise.*



Name it! shouted the Mayor, stamping fiercely at a small band of scorpions.



Once the town is bonny and gay...once it is fresh with air and clean with the sunlight... then, you'll keep it that way." The Piper stood poised, his pipe before his lips.



Done! roared the Mayor. *A ridiculous promise! Of course we will do it... We want it that way...*



He tore off his trousers and pursued a small dinosaur that had been up his pant leg. *Of course we'll do it.*



With that the Piper leaped in the air, cracked his heels together twice and a half, and blew a blinding note, the shrillest of shrill. Alighting, he set off at a crooked trot. He screeched bro-

ken notes and square notes, bouncing jagged notes and wriggling notes that twisted like eels. Wailing high as the wind, flattening low as a funeral drum, the pipe sobbed and screamed.



The people shut their eyes and stuffed their ears. This was worse than the monsters!



But then, the air around seemed to lighten. The children looked about them wide eyed. The goblins were leaving!



The sky was becoming blue!...The leaves of trees were lifted!
The grass stood straighter!...There was sunlight on the roadway!



The people gasped a mighty gasp...There, vanishing toward the rim of the world in the faraway west were the flying things, the scampering things, the crawling, slippery, scuttling things. They were following the Piper's manic tune. Soon they were gone and a bright peace was on the town.



Now the people of the town sat down to enjoy the sunshine of their doorways. They endlessly discussed the strange Piper. Some described him as tall like a thundercloud...some said no,

he was more like a tree, a flaming tree. Others remembered that he was mounted on a plunging white stallion, and still others talked of the terrible sword he carried.



They were all agreed that he was magic, a supernatural magician. And what, asked the children, was the tune he played? That, mut-

tered the elders with heavy head shaking, was a thing that defied description and which children would not understand anyway.



So the elders warned the children to be quiet and to be good. Walk just so, they said, and talk just so...and do not ask questions for which there are no answers because no one wants the plague to return.

The old people sat in the doorways gossiping about the Piper and shushing the children. They haggled in the market place and wished the curse of the Piper upon those who traded with a sharper eye.



Children who laughed too much or asked too many questions were plainly becoming monsters, the people said, and

such children were whipped soundly and sent to bed with the threat that the fiery Piper would come for them.



And all this made the elders very careful, and very solemn, for none of them wanted the return of the plague. They

wanted the town to remain bonny and gay..They were quite determined to watch everyone very closely.



When, at last, the town had become a place of tiptoes and shushes and the people were fear-

ful of moving quickly or thinking bad thoughts, it was noticed that the town seemed darker.



"It is the fault of the children," the solemn elders agreed, *"They are careless of the Piper's word. He warned us to be careful."* So all the children in town were spanked three times a day, before meals, and shaken well, into the bargain, on Sunday. Nobody wanted the children to grow into demons or monsters or even small fiends.



Then one day, when it had grown quite dark, a stranger wandered into town. He picked his way between the gossiping women in the market, he stepped over the slothful, suspicious folk in the doorways. He watched the sternfaced old men stamping away the children from their benches in the pale and seldom sunlight.



The stranger stepped up to the Mayor, who stood on the Town Hall steps. The Mayor was watching a child closely. The child looked as if it were about to laugh at a butterfly. The Mayor gripped his stick tightly and set his jaw. The stranger coughed.



"We should do away with those butterflies," rasped the Mayor. "They cause trouble."

"The town has the chill of night again," said the stranger. "Have the monsters returned?"



The Mayor looked at the stranger closely. "We've done our best to keep them out. But, these children!" He sighed and shook his head.



"Perhaps I can help you," suggested the stranger. He stepped into the street and from beneath his cloak he took a pipe. Setting it to his lips he blew three curling, dancing notes that seemed to lighten the sky. Children leaped and came running.



It was the Piper again. This time the music glided and sang, laughed and soared.



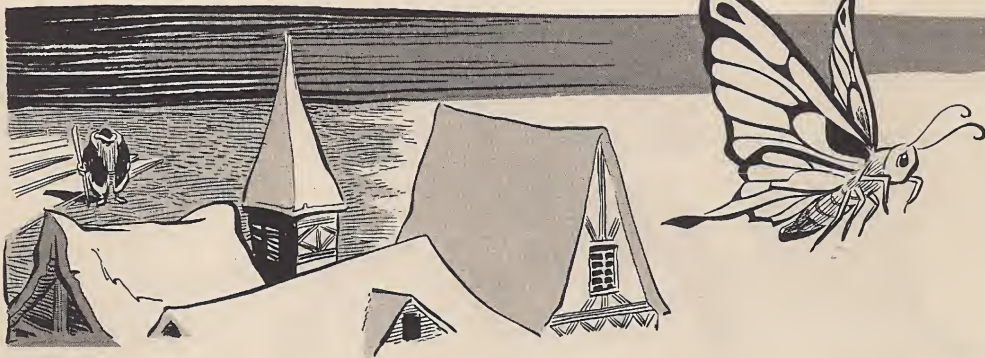
With lilting step the Piper danced off to the east, off toward the sunrise.



And this time the children, laughing with the notes of the pipe, followed, even as the demons had before them. Soon they were gone. "He's done it again," murmured the



old Mayor, "for it was the Piper. He's saved us a second time." The old man frowned at the butterfly. "Be quiet," he cried, shaking his stick, "Let that be a warning to you."



If the butterfly heard, it gave no sign but fluttered raggedly off toward the lands that held the morning and left the edge of the world where night seemed to be settling, for good.