

THE PIPE SHOW MURDER

By

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[Note: This story is the third in a series of stories drawn from the same socio-political-economic background found in the stories entitled "Satisfaction" and "Death in a Closed Room".]

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The hyper drive cruise ship Rinaldo was outbound to the pentel star system. The Rinaldo was an Empire class ship; one of the most luxurious ever designed, built, and launched. It had a full line of upper class suites, exhibition halls, dining rooms, smoking lounges and other amenities. It was the Titanic of its day and, unlike the Titanic, it would not sink.

This trip was unlike any other of its jaunts down the starways. On board were the Emperor Leopaldo and his retinue. His staff went all the way from his chief weapons master Varten von Eckman down to his personal chef. Leopaldo was, ironically, housed in the lavish "Emperor's Suite".

Varten von Eckman knocked on the study door and was ushered into the presence of the Emperor by one of the attendants.

"My Emperor."

"Don't be so formal Varten. It's just the two of us. Sit down and light up your pipe."

Varten observed that Leo was smoking a new acquisition. The pipe was an Old Earth Ser Jacopo briar calabash. He also eyed the "NO SMOKING" sign on the wall behind Leo's overstuffed chair.

"No Smoking in the Emperor's Suite!" he chided his friend.

"Yeah, isn't that a blast!" he chuckled. "I'll send the captain of the ship a decree to correct the sign to "Pipe smoking is mandatory in the Emperor's Suite!" he said with a grin and a laugh.

Varten filled up his straight saddle bit sandblasted stacked chimney pipe. Leo had given it to him many years ago. It had a deep blast and was from Old Earth. The nomenclature

had been worn off over the centuries. All that could be read was “oke” on the shank of the pipe and remnants of a yin/yang symbol on the stem.

“Leo” he asked, “What do you hope to accomplish by this trip?”

Leo puffed and answered “As you know, one of the activities scheduled on the Rinaldo’s voyage is a pipe collectors’ exhibition and show. There are probably several hundred pipe collectors and fanciers on board. Beside myself, there are four collectors worthy of mention that are in my league.”

“ Jan Folders of the Merde Family has a nice collection of Old Earth Pipes, mainly from Italian Carvers. Richard Marriann of the Span Family is a collector of Old Earth pipes made by late 20th Century American Carvers. Tony Tragarra of the Family Stone is a collector that specializes in high-grade Old Earth pipes from Denmark, and white stemmed pipes from Italy. Finally, Mark McNam of the Family Sherlock has a well respected collection of Peterson Pipes.”

“While others at the convention have very nice collections of new pipes, pipes from their planetary systems, and pipes made from many exotic materials, these four are the collectors of primary interest to me. One of these four, I don’t know which one, has sent a message to me and offered to trade me a very rare Old Earth pipe carved by a man named Micoli. In his lifetime Micoli only made a few pipes. Today, only two are known by me to exist. One is known to be in the collection of Jan Folders and the other is in the possession of one of these four collectors.”

“ I intend to obtain the Micoli pipe for my collection. Oh, by the way, this aged wexel virginia tobacco that Nick Reardon sent me is excellent!” Leo exclaimed.

“Yes it is!” commented Varten “Nick did an excellent job in solving those murders on Chrisongas. The wexel virginia tobacco that he brought back is most excellent. You know that Nick is on board mingling with the passengers and keeping his eyes and ears open.”

“ Have Nick pay special attention to these four. He should get close with them. I would like him to find out who has the Micoli and what it will take to get it.”

“OK Leo, I will be seeing him later tonight in one of the public smoking lounges and will pass on your instructions.” Varten responded.

“Leo, what makes this Micoli pipe so desirable to you? After all, you have never seen it, smoked it, or even know what it looks like?” inquired Varten.

Leo replied “Varten, years ago I presented you with the pipe you are now finishing, correct?”

“Yes.” He replied “You didn’t think much about it. When you gave it to me you said that it was a pipe of good quality and would serve me well for many years as you hoped I would serve you.”

“Yes, that is true. I will tell you about the pipe you are holding. The symbol on the stem and the “oke” that is still readable indicates to me that it is a James T. Cooke pipe. James Cooke carved pipes in the late 20th Century and early 21st Century on Old Earth. He carved pipes in the geopolitical area known as the United States. In that time period, his pipes were highly desirable and hard to obtain. There are a number of reasons why this was so. One, his pipes were from the top Extra, Extra grade briar. Two, his execution of the pipe making craft was of the highest order. His attention to detail of the briar grain was pretty much unsurpassed. Three, the finishes he used were only known to him. Fourth, and finally, he only made a limited number of pipes in his lifetime, thus scarcity plays a factor as only a few survive to this day.”

“If the pipe you have just finished smoking had a clean nomenclature, its value could be equal to the holdings of some of the minor families in the Empire. Even as it is, it is a very valuable piece and would be very desirable to many of the attendees at this pipe show.” Leo concluded.

Varten choked, “Leo, I had no idea of the value of this pipe. I am truly honored. I had no idea.....” he stammered.

Leo continued “The Micoli pipe meets all of these criteria. From the holo I saw, the nomenclature on the bent bulldog is quite pronounced.”

Both of the smokers emptied their pipes into the portable smokes disposal.

Leo said, “I am going to bed. Find out for me who has the pipe. Good night Varten.”

Varten left the room. He was still shocked to his being told the value of the pipe he had just finished smoking.

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Meanwhile, Nick Reardon was sitting in one of the smoking lounges in the first-class passenger decks on the Rinaldo. Thus far on this trip he had found out that pipe collectors and smokers were truly a unique group. They came from all walks of life, many backgrounds, but all were connected by the “brotherhood of the briar”. If there was one thing he learned, it was that pipe collectors love nothing more than to talk about their collections, especially to other collectors. He found that one collector never demeaned another’s collection, and that, on a whole, they were honest in their dealings with each other.

Nick was engaged in a small group, all enjoying their favorite beverage and all smoking some fantastic pipes with different tobaccos. Beside himself, there were Rich Marriann,

Jan Folders, Tony Tragarra, Mark McNam, and three other collectors. Nick and the other three collectors sat back and listened while the four others talked about their collections.

Jan was discussing his collection of Italian pipes. “You know that I have an extensive collection of fine Old Earth Italian pipes. I have a number of Castellors, Ser Jacopo, Maestro de Paja, and other fine pipes! I also have the only Micoli pipe that is known to exist. That is one pipe I will never get rid of!”

Tony laughed, “Yeah, but if the Emperor traded you his Castello #84 hawkbills, I bet you would snap them up for the Micoli!”

“No, I don’t think so, but I might consider it if the price was EXTREMELY right!”

Everyone laughed.

Mark intimated to the group in a low, barely audible voice “I heard that another Micoli pipe has surfaced and the Emperor is very interested in it!”

“Fat chance!” exclaimed Richard. If it were found, the collector would let everyone know, and see how high it would go!”

Jan interjected “I think we would have all seen it if it existed. It would make a nice partner to mine....sort of end its loneliness!”

“Right Jan!” Tony said, “If your Micoli met another Micoli, we might have little Micolii!”

Everyone in the group chuckled.

“Real funny Tony. Bite Me!” retorted Jan as he puffed on an old craggy Ardor pipe.

“Has anyone seen my tobacco pouch?” asked Mark.

Everyone responded that they had not.

“Damn, lost another one!” he ranted.

The conversation turned to the virtues of black stems versus white stems, straight pipes versus bent pipes, and decrying the lack of any replacement for the true Old Earth tobaccos.

Nick excused himself from the group as he saw Varten enter the room. He joined him in a small booth where Varten ordered a drink.

Varten told him about his meeting with the Emperor. “... and to think how I have treated this old pipe. I never knew what I had.”

Nick reported on the conversation of the pipe group. "Well it looks like at least eight people, besides the Emperor and us, are aware of the existence of a rumored second Micoli pipe. Excluding myself and the other three in the group, one of the four others are lying low. If I were to hazard a guess, I would suspect Richard due to his interest in American carvers, or Mark since he brought up the topic."

Varten responded "I don't know which one has it. All four bear a close watch. Let's call it a night Nick."

As they left the room Nick noticed that the group was still going at it. He chuckled "You better watch that Cooke pipe, Varten. Make sure it is not in your back pocket when you sit down!"

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Nick was awakened to the sound of the beeping of his communicator. He hit the button and noted the time was 4:20 A.M. As he placed it to his ear, "Hello".

"Nick? Varten. Please come to Room 65 on the C deck, first class. There has been an accident. Mark McNam is dead!"

Nick dressed and arrived at cabin #65. He knocked on the door and Varten opened it. Inside he saw the Rinaldo's security personnel photographing and investigating the scene.

In a chair sat Mark McNam, obviously dead. His pipe lay on the floor with some ashes scattered about. Nick closely examined the body and the pipe. "What happened, Varten?"

"About 3:50 A.M. the Rinaldo's security officer got an anonymous call from this room to come to the apartment. The communicator used was the one over there on the table. Don't worry; it was wiped clean of prints. When security arrived, there was no answer. They used a master digital key to enter the room. They found the scene as you see it.", Varten answered.

The ship security people removed the body and finished their investigation. The chief investigating officer told Varten that a report would be sent to the Emperor's staff with their findings and the medical examiner's results. He asked Varten to lock up when he was finished. Before the officer left, Varten asked him to wake the purser and find out the number, types, and weight of the baggage that Mr. McNam had when he arrived on the ship and to contact him with the information. He also instructed him to caution the crew not to discuss the death with anyone, especially the Rinaldo's passengers.

After the officer left, Varten said to Nick "Of course you recognize all the signs of cyanide poisoning. The faint odor of almonds gives it away. It is very slight over the

aroma of the tobacco, but it is there. You also noted the color of the victim. The autopsy will confirm the manner of the death.”

“Yes, it looks like a poisoning. It was made to look like a natural death, but I am sure that it was not. Look at the pipe. It is a Peterson Sherlock Holmes series “Lestrade” with a non P-lip stem. The tobacco appears to be a fine cut English blend.”

They searched the room and the contents of the three cases of pipes. All the slots contained their allotment of pipes. Among his personal effects they found several tins of a pseudo-Virginia tobacco. “It looks like theft was not the motive, Varten.” Nick said.

Varten’s communicator rang. He was informed, by the purser, that upon his arrival Mark had a suitcase and three travel cases of pipes, and that the cause of death was found to be death by cyanide poison.

They examined the suitcase.

“Varten, Look! Either my eyes are off or this suitcase has a well concealed hidden compartment” said Nick. He felt around the inside of the suitcase and found a small unused stud and pressed it. A small door opened. Inside was a velvet pipe pouch containing a pipe. They opened the pipe pouch and took out a beautiful natural bulldog pipe.

“Don’t tell me Nick. I’ll bet the pipe is stamped “MICOLI”.

“Correct!”

“Nick, I’ll bet Mark McNam was murdered to obtain the Micoli. The murder did not find it! Such a loss!”

“Varten, look here. There is a note inside the bag.”

They took the piece of paper out of the pipe glove and read it.

Emperor Leopaldo,

It was I who sent you the holo of the Micoli pipe. Many years ago, when I was a neophyte pipe collector, you gave me much advice to help me improve my collection. I recently found out that you worked through intermediaries to find and give me the opportunity to obtain pipes that I might never had the chance to acquire.

I am presenting you this Micoli pipe as a token of my gratitude.

*Your fellow brother of the briar,
Mark McNam*

“Wow Nick. This will hit the Emperor hard! I will take the pipe and letter to him and report what has happened.” Varten continued “The show starts at 10:00 A.M. Before that I want you to interview Folders, Tragarra, and Marriann. Find out who did this! We know that it was poison. We know the killer did not find the Micoli pipe so he doesn’t know where it is.”

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Security personnel first brought Richard Marriann to Nick.

“Richard, I suppose that you know that Mark was found dead. It appears that he died while smoking his pipe.”

“Terrible, terrible, I heard it at breakfast.”

“What were you doing last night after the group broke up?” Nick inquired.

“I retired for the night.” He replied, “No one saw me until breakfast this morning. Did he die of natural causes?” Richard asked.

“Yes.” Nick lied. “I understand that Mark’s collection of Peterson pipes was quite extensive.”

“He did love his Peterson pipes. I’ll tell you a little story. He once met a man named Dale A’lkins who was also a Peterson collector. Dale only collected Petersons with a fishtail stem. He hated the Peterson P-lip stemmed pipes. Mark decided only to collect the Petersons with the P-lip stems. They use to have a grand go-at-it at the shows. Dale would bring his rasp and threaten Mark that he would file off the P-lips of every pipe in his collection and turn them into fishtail stems! Hahaha, they had a good time with the kidding.” related Richard.

Nick asked him if he knew if Dale A’lkins was at the show.

Richard replied that Dale had passed on several years earlier and was well over 150 years old when he died. “Even at 150 years old, he still considered himself a young man.”

He asked Richard “Do you know what kind of tobacco Mark smoked?”

“Yes, he usually smoked a Virginia Flake, nothing else.”

Nick asked him a few other perfunctory questions and then dismissed him.

Tony Tregarra was interviewed next. His interview confirmed the responses of Richard. He told Nick that his roomie for the night was a “Little Miss Bo” would vouch for his presence all night long. He also recalled that Mark smoked a Virginia Flake tobacco.

Finally, Jan Folders was brought in for an interview. He was aware of the passing of Mark. Like Richard, he had no alibi.

“Jan, What can you tell me about Mark?” inquired Nick.

“Mark and I became good friends over the years. He had an astounding collection of Peterson pipes with their P-lips. How he got some of his pieces, I’ll never know! You know how it is, he liked Irish Old Earth pipes, I liked Italian pipes. We helped each other out with acquisitions whenever we could.”

“What kind of tobacco did Mark smoke”, asked Nick.

“I’m not sure. He either liked a light aromatic or sometimes a latakia blend.”

After a few other general questions, Nick dismissed Jan. He used his communicator to report to Varten.

Varten told him to report to the Emperor’s Suite at 10:00 and to have security round up the three suspects for an audience with the Emperor.

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At 10:00 A.M. five people were assembled in the library of the Emperors Suite; Varten, Nick, Tony, Jan, and Richard awaiting the Emperor’s arrival. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen minutes passed. The “three suspects” were getting restless. Finally Emperor Leopaldo arrived.

As the Emperor walked into the room, they all arose and began to bow.

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Let’s all be informal. To quote an Old Earth ruler
“Gentlemen, you may smoke.”

They all got out their favorite pipes, filled them up with some of the Emperor’s finest tobacco, and lit them up.

“You have all met my assistants Varten von Eckman and Nick Reardon. They deliberately misled you about Mark’s demise. It was not from natural causes. He was murdered.”

Leopaldo looked at each of the three to see how they took the revelation.

“As we speak, your rooms are being searched, along with the pipes in the displays that you have for the show.”

“What are you looking for? The rumored second Micoli pipe?” Richard asked timidly.

“No” the Emperor replied. “We are looking for the murder weapon!”

“Let me tell you what I believe the sequence of events were last night. Nick and you were all in a discussion last night with three other pipe collectors. One of you, Mr. X, purloined Mark’s tobacco pouch. You all knew that there might be a second Micoli pipe, but Mr. X knew for sure that there was one and that it was somewhere in Mark’s possession. Mr. X may have wanted to trade Mark for it or buy it outright or maybe he did not approach Mark. It does not matter.”

“After you all left and went to your room, Mr. X applied cyanide to the tobacco in Mark’s pouch, and either followed Mark, or later returned to Mark’s room and returned his tobacco pouch.”

“Mr. X and Mark smoked a pipe together. Mark drifted off to unconsciousness. Mr. X searched Mark’s room and luggage, but did not find the Micoli. Mr. X exchanged Mark’s pipe with one he had brought with him that was previously smoked. He let it drop and scatter some ash. He took Mark’s pipe and tobacco pouch. He removed all traces of his presence in the room. He then, using a voice distorter, called security and left before their arrival.”

“When security arrived they found what looked like a man who died of natural causes, but, in-fact died of cyanide poisoning.”

Emperor Leopaldo reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a pipe pouch. “Here is the cause of the murder of a dear friend of mine.” He placed the Micoli on the table for all to see. “Let me read you the note that was with it.”

He read them the contents of the note.

The Emperor’s communicator beeped. He answered it. “It is just as I suspected.” He said to the person on the other end.

The three men looked at each other through lowered eyes.

Emperor Leopaldo said to the three “It’s time to end this charade. Why did you do it Jan?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are Mr. X, Jan. You made several mistakes. You replaced Mark’s P-lip Peterson with a Peterson pipe having a fishtail stem. It is well established that Mark only collected and smoked Peterson pipes having P-lip stems. Second, the tobacco left in the pipe was an Englis-latakia blend, something Mark never smoked, and you do. Thirdly, you took Mark’s tobacco pouch with the cyanide laced virginia flake tobacco.”

“Your room and display were searched. Security found Mark’s Peterson P-lip pipe among your pipes. No doubt a chemical analysis will detect traces of cyanide in it. Also, the shredder-disposal in your room will no doubt show residues from the tobacco pouch and the cyanide laced tobacco.”

“Jan, You are Mr. X! I even think I know why you did it. Until now you had the only Micoli pipe known to exist from Old Earth. For another to appear and you not to have it would be unbearable. This was something you could not deal with.”

Jan looked up at the Emperor in defiance. “Yes, Yes. You are right. I almost got away with it. Mark would not let me have it. I could not figure out why, but now I see.”

“Yes, you almost got away with the crime. Perhaps your biggest mistake was committing murder during a pipe exhibition.”, retorted Leopaldo. “Take him away!”

Varten, and Nick remained in the room with Leopaldo.

“This was a very strange case sir. Nice work!” Nick said.

“I could not have done it without your eyes, ears, and deductions.”, he answered.

“As you observed, Nick, pipe collectors are one interesting and strange group of individuals. They are very involved in their collections. Pipe collecting is almost a disease, a pipe acquisition disease. Someone once observed ‘If you own one pipe you are a pipe smoker. If you have two or more you are a pipe collector.’”

“Tragic affair.” He said “However, let’s remember Mark and go to the show. I think I will enter this pipe in the best pipe judging contest to see if it wins the Best Pipe of Show contest.”

They went, it did, and the Rinaldo plotted its way among the stars.

-End-