

HALCYON CLASSICS

# H. BEAM PIPER



The Return

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Title: The Return

Author: H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire

Release Date: September 1, 2006 [EBook #19158]

Language: English

\*\*\* START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RETURN \*\*\*

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# THE RETURN

by

# **H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire**

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Altamont cast a quick, routine glance at the instrument panels and then looked down through the transparent nose of the helicopter at the yellow-brown river five hundred feet below. Next he scraped the last morsel from his plate and ate it.

"What did you make this out of, Jim?" he asked. "I hope you kept notes while you were concocting it. It's good."

"The two smoked pork chops left over from yesterday evening," Loudons said, "and that bowl of rice that's been taking up space in the refrigerator the last couple of days, together with a little egg powder and some milk. I ground the chops up and mixed them with the rice and other stuff. Then added some bacon, to make grease to fry it in."

Altamont chuckled. That was Loudons, all right: he could take a few left-overs, mess them together, pop them in the skillet, and have a meal that would turn the chef back at the Fort green with envy. He filled his cup and offered the pot.

"Caffchoc?" he asked.

Loudons held his cup out to be filled, blew on it, sipped, and then hunted on the ledge under the desk for the butt of the cigar he had half-smoked the evening before.

"Did you ever drink coffee, Monty?" the socio-psychologist asked, getting the cigar drawing to his taste.

"Coffee? No. I've read about it, of course. We'll have to organize an expedition to Brazil, sometime, to get seeds and try raising some."

Loudons blew a smoke ring toward the rear of the cabin.

"A much overrated beverage," he replied. "We found some, once, when I was on that expedition into Idaho, in what must have been the stockroom of a hotel. Vacuum-packed in moisture-proof containers, and free from radioactivity. It wasn't nearly as good as caffchoc.

"But then, I suppose, a pre-bustup coffee drinker couldn't stomach this stuff we're drinking."

Loudons looked forward, up the river they were following. "Get anything on the radio?" he asked. "I noticed you took us up to about ten thousand, while I was shaving."

Altamont got out his pipe and tobacco pouch, filling the former slowly and carefully.

"Not a whisper. I tried Colony Three, in the Ozarks, and I tried to call in that tribe of workers in Louisiana. I couldn't get either."

"Maybe if we tried to get a little more power on the set...."

That was Loudons, too, Altamont thought. There wasn't a better man at the Fort, when it came to dealing with people. But confront him with a problem about things and he was lost.

That was one of the reasons why he and the stocky, phlegmatic social scientist made such a good team, he thought. As far as he, himself, was concerned, people were just a mysterious, exasperatingly unpredictable order of things which were subject to no known natural laws.

And Loudons thought the same thing about machines: he couldn't psychoanalyze them.

Altamont gestured with his pipe toward the nuclear-electric

conversion unit, between the control-cabin and the living quarters in the rear of the boxcar-sized helicopter.

"We have enough power back there to keep this windmill in the air twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, for the next fifteen years," he said. "We just don't have enough radio. If I'd step up the power on this set any more, it'd burn out before I could say, 'Altamont calling Fort Ridgeway.'"

"How far are we from Pittsburgh now?" Loudons wanted to know.

Altamont looked across the cabin at the big map of the United States as they had been, the red and green and blue and yellow patchwork of vanished political divisions. The colors gleamed through the transparent overlay on which this voyage of re-discovery was plotted.

The red line of their journey started at Fort Ridgeway, in what had been Arizona. It angled east by a little north, to Colony Three, in northern Arkansas ... sharply northeast to St. Louis and its lifeless ruins ... then to Chicago and Gary, where little bands of Stone Age reversions stalked and fought and ate each other ... Detroit, where things that had completely forgotten they were human emerged from their burrows only at night ... Cleveland, where a couple of cobalt bombs must have landed in the lake and drenched everything with radioactivity that still lingered after two centuries ... Akron, where vegetation was only beginning to break through the glassy slag ... Cincinnati, where they had last stopped....

"How's the leg this morning, Jim?" he asked.

"Little stiff. Doesn't hurt much, though."

"Why, we're about fifty miles, as we follow that river, and that's relatively straight." He looked down through the transparent nose of the copter at a town, now choked with trees that grew among the tumbled walls. "I think that's Aliquippa."

Loudons looked and shrugged, then looked again and pointed.

"There's a bear. Just ducked into that church or movie theater or whatever. I wonder what he thinks we are."

Altamont puffed slowly at his pipe. "I wonder if we're going to find anything at all in Pittsburgh."

"You mean people, as distinct from those biped beasts we've found so far? I doubt it," Loudons replied, finishing his caffchoc and wiping his mustache with the back of his hand. "I think the whole eastern half of the country is nothing but forest like this, and the highest type of life is just about three cuts below *Homo Neanderthalensis*, almost impossible to contact, and even more impossible to educate."

"I wasn't thinking about that. I've just about given up hope of finding anybody or even a reasonably high level of barbarism," Altamont said. "I was thinking about that cache of microfilmed books that was buried at the Carnegie Library."

"If it was buried," Loudons qualified. "All we have is that article in that two-century-old copy of Time about how the people at the library had constructed the crypt and were beginning the microfilming. We don't know if they ever had a chance to get it finished, before the rockets started landing."

They passed over a dam of flotsam that had banked up at a wrecked bridge and accumulated enough mass to resist the periodic floods that had kept the river usually clear. Three human figures fled across a sand-flat at one end of it and disappeared into the woods. Two of them carried spears tipped with something that sparkled in the sunlight, probably shards of glass.

"You know, Monty, I get nightmares, sometimes, thinking about what things must be like in Europe," Loudons said.

Five or six words went crashing through the brush below. Altamont nodded when he saw them.

"Maybe tomorrow, we'll let down and shoot a cow," he said. "I was looking in the freeze-locker and the fresh meat's getting a little low. Or a wild pig, if we find a good stand of oak trees. I could enjoy what you'd do with some acorn-fed pork."

He looked across the table. "Finished?" he asked Loudons. "Take over, then. I'll go back and wash the dishes."

They rose, and Loudons, favoring his left leg, moved over to the seat at the controls.

Altamont gathered up the two cups, the stainless-steel dishes, and the knives and the forks and spoons, going up the steps over the shielded converter and ducking his head to avoid the seat in the forward top machine-gun turret. He washed and dried the dishes, noting with satisfaction that the gauge of the water tank was still reasonably high, and glanced out one of the windows. Loudons was taking the big helicopter upstairs, for a better view.

Now and then, among the trees, there would be a glint of glassy slag, usually in a fairly small circle. That was to be expected: beside the three or four H-bombs that had fallen on the Pittsburgh area, mentioned in the transcripts of the last news to reach the Fort from the outside, the whole district had been pelted, more or less at random, with fission bombs.

West of the confluence of the Allegheny and the Monongahela, it would probably be worse than this.

"Can you see Pittsburgh yet, Jim?" he called out.

"Yes, it's a mess! Worse than Gary, worse than Akron even."

"Monty! Come here! I think I have something!"

Picking up the pipe he had laid down, Altamont hurried forward, dodging his six-foot length under the gun turret and swinging down from the walkway over the converter.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Smoke. A lot of smoke, twenty or thirty fires at the very least."

Loudons had shifted from Forward to Hover and was peering through a pair of binoculars. "See that island, the long one? Across the river from it, on the north side, toward this end. Yes, by Einstein! And I can see cleared ground, and what I think are houses, inside a stockade...."

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## II

Murray Hughes walked around the corner of the cabin into the morning sunlight, lacing his trousers, with his hunting shirt thrown over his bare shoulders. He found, without much surprise, that his father had also slept late. Verner Hughes was just beginning to shave.

Inside the kitchen, his mother and the girls were clattering pots and skillets.

Outside the kitchen door, his younger brother, Hector, was noisily chopping wood.

Going through the door, he filled another of the light-metal basins with hot water, found his razor, and went outside again, setting the basin on the bench.

Most of the ware in the Hughes cabin was of light-metal. Murray and his father had mined it in the dead city up the river, from a place where it had floated to the top of a puddle of slag, back when the city had been blasted, at the end of the hard times.

It had been hard work, but the stuff had been easy to carry down to where they had hidden their boat. And, for once, they'd had no trouble with the Scowrsers.

Too bad they couldn't say as much for yesterday's hunting trip!

As he rubbed lather into the stubble on his face, he cursed with irritation. That had been a bad-luck hunt, all around.

They had gone out before dawn, hunting into the hills to the north. They'd spent the day at it, and shot one small wild pig. Lucky it was

small, at that. They'd have had to abandon a full-grown one, after the Scowrers had began hunting them. Six of them, as big a band as he'd ever seen together at one time, had managed to cut them off from the stockade. He and his father had been forced to circle miles out of their way.

His father had shot one, and he'd had to leave his hatchet sticking in the skull of another, when his rifle had misfired.

That meant a trip to the gunsmith's, for a new hatchet and to have the mainspring of the rifle replaced. Nobody could afford to have a rifle that couldn't be trusted, least of all a hunter and prospector.

On top of everything else, he had had a few words with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, the other day.

Well, at least that could be smoothed over. Barrett would be glad to do business with him, once the gunsmith saw that hard tool-steel he had dug out of that place down the river. Hardest steel either he or his father had ever found, and it hadn't been atom-spoiled, either.

He cleaned, wiped and stropped his razor and put it back in the case. He threw out the wash-water on the compost pile and went into the cabin, putting on his shirt and his belt. Then he passed through to the front porch, where his father was already eating at the table.

The people of the Toon like to eat in the open. It was something they'd always done, just as they'd always like to eat together in the evenings.

He sweetened his cup of chicory with a lump of maple sugar and began to sip it before he sat down, standing with one foot on the bench and looking down across the parade ground, past the Aitch-Cue House, toward the river and the wall.

"If you're coming around to Alex's way of thinking—and mine—it won't hurt you to admit it, son," his father said.

Murray turned, looking at his father with the beginning of anger, and then he grinned. The elders were constantly keeping the young men alert with these tests. He checked back over his actions since he had come out onto the porch.

... to the table, sugar in his chicory, one foot on the bench ... which had reminded him again of the absence of the hatchet from his belt and brought an automatic frown ... then the glance toward the gunsmith's shop, and across the parade ground ... the glance including the houses into which so much labor had gone, the wall that had been built from rubble and topped with pointed stakes, the white slabs of marble that marked the graves of the First Tenant and the men of the Old Toon....

He had thought, at that moment, that maybe his father and Alex Barrett and Reader Rawson and Tenant Mycroft Jones and the others were right: there were too many things here that could not be moved along with them, if they decided to move.

It would be false modesty, refusal to see things as they were, not to admit that he was the leader of the younger men, and the boys of the Irregulars. He had been forced to face the responsibilities of that fact since last winter.

Then, the usual theological arguments about the proper order of the Sacred Books and the true nature of the Risen One had been replaced by a violent controversy when Sholto Jiminez and Birdy Edwards had reopened the old question of the advisability of moving the Toon and settling elsewhere.

He had been in favor of the idea himself and found that the other young men had followed his lead. But, for the last month or so, he had begun to doubt the wisdom of it.

It was probably reluctance to admit this to himself that had brought on

the strained feelings between himself and his old friend, the gunsmith.

"I'll have to drill the Irregulars, today," he said. "Birdy Edwards has been drilling them while we've been hunting. But I'll go up and see Alex about a new hatchet and fixing my rifle. I'll have a talk with him."

He stepped forward to the edge of the porch, still munching on a honey-dipped piece of cornbread, and glanced up at the sky. That was a queer bird; he had never seen a bird with a wing action like that.

Then he realized that the object was not a bird at all.

His father was staring at it, too.

"Murray! That's ... that's like the old stories from the time of the wars!"

But Murray was already racing across the parade ground toward the Aitch-Cue House, where the big iron ring hung by its chain from a gallows-like post, with a hammer beside it.

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The stockaded village became larger, details grew plainer, as the helicopter came slanting down and began spiraling around it.

It was a fairly big place, some forty or fifty acres in a rough parallelogram, surrounded by a wall of varicolored stone and brick and concrete rubble from old ruins, topped with a palisade of pointed poles. There was a small jetty projecting into the river, to which six or eight boats of different sorts were tied; a gate opened onto this from the wall.

Inside the stockade, there were close to a hundred buildings, ranging from small cabins to a structure with a belfry. It seemed to have been a church, partly ruined in the war of two centuries ago and later rebuilt.

A stream came down from the woods, across the cultivated land around the fortified village. There was a rough flume which carried the water from a dam close to the edge of the forest and provided a fall to turn a mill wheel.

"Look, strip farming," Loudons pointed. "See the alternate strips of grass and plowed ground. These people understand soil conservation.

"They have horses, too."

As he spoke, three riders left the village at a gallop. They separated, and the people in the fields, who had all started for the village, turned and began hurrying toward the woods. Two of the riders headed for a pasture in which cattle had been grazing and started herding them also into the woods.

For a while, there was a scurrying of little figures in the village below. Then, not a moving thing was in sight.

"There's good organization," Loudons said. "Everybody seems to know what to do, and how to get it done promptly. And look how neat the whole place is. Policed up. I'll bet anything we'll find that they have a military organization, or a military tradition at least.

"We'll have a lot to find out: you can't understand a people until you understand their background and their social organization."

"Humph. Let me have a look at their artifacts: that will tell what kind of people they are," Altamont said, swinging the glasses back and forth over the enclosure. "Water-power mill, water-power sawmill—building on the left side of the water wheel, see the pile of fresh lumber beside it. Blacksmith shop, and from that chimney, I'd say a small foundry, too.

"Wonder what that little building out on the tip of the island is, it has a water wheel too. Undershot wheel, and it looks like it could be raised or lowered. Now, I wonder...."

"Monty, I think we ought to land right in the middle of the enclosure, on that open plaza thing, in front of the building that looks like a reconditioned church. That's probably the Royal Palace, or the Pentagon, or the Kremlin, or whatever."

Altamont started to object, paused, and then nodded. "I think you're right, Jim. From the way they scattered, and got their livestock into the woods, they probably expect us to bomb them. We have to get inside and that's the quickest way to do it." He thought for a moment. "We'd better be armed, when we go out. Pistols, auto-carbines, and a few of those concussion-grenades in case we have to break up a concerted attack. I'll get them."

The plaza, the houses and the cabins around it, the two-hundred-year-

old church, all were silent and apparently lifeless as they set the helicopter down. Once Loudons caught a movement inside the door of a house, and saw a metallic glint.

"There's a gun up there," he said. "Looks like a four-pounder. Brass. I knew that smith-shop was also a foundry. See that little curl of smoke? That's the gunner's slow-match.

"I'd thought maybe that thing on the island was a powder mill. That would be where they'd put it. Probably extract their niter from the dung of their horses and cows. Sulfur probably from coal-mine drainage.

"Jim, this is really something!"

"I hope they don't cut loose with that thing," Loudons said, looking apprehensively at the brass-rimmed black muzzle that was covering them from the belfry. "I wonder if we ought to—Oh-oh, here they come!"

Three or four young men stepped out of the wide door of the old church. They wore fringed buckskin trousers and buckskin shirts and odd caps of deerskin with visors to shade the eyes and similar beaks behind to protect the neck. They had powder horns and bullet pouches slung over their shoulders, and long rifles in their hands. They stepped aside as soon as they were out. Carefully avoiding any gesture of menace, they simply stood, watching the helicopter which had landed in their village.

Three other men followed them out. They, too, wore buckskins and the odd double-visored caps. One had a close-cropped white beard, and on the shoulders of his buckskin shirt, he wore the single silver bars of a first lieutenant of the vanished United States Army. He had a pistol on his belt. The pistol had the saw-handle grip of an automatic, but it was a flintlock, as were the rifles of the young men who stood so watchfully on either side of the door.

Two middle-aged men accompanied the bearded man and the trio advanced toward the helicopter.

"All right, come on, Monty."

Loudons opened the door and let down the steps. Picking up an auto-carbine, he slung it and stepped out of the helicopter, Altamont behind him. They advanced to meet the party from the church, halting when they were about twenty feet apart.

"I must apologize, lieutenant, for dropping in on you so unceremoniously."

Loudons stopped, wondering if the man with the white beard understood a word of what he was saying.

"The natural way to come in, when you travel in the air," the old man replied. "At least, you came in openly. I can promise you a better reception than that you got at the city to the west of us a couple of days ago."

"Now how did you know that we had trouble the day-before-yesterday?" Loudons demanded.

The old man's eyes sparkled with child-like pleasure. "That surprises you, my dear sir? In a moment, I daresay you'll be surprised at the simplicity of it.

"You have a nasty rip in the left leg of your trousers, and the cloth around it is stained with blood. Through the rip, I perceive a bandage. Obviously, you have suffered a recent wound. I further observe that the side of your flying machine bears recent scratches, as though from the spears or throwing hatchets of the Scowlers. Evidently, they attacked you as you were landing. It is fortunate that these cannibal devils are too stupid and too anxious for human flesh to exercise patience."

"Well, that explains how you knew that we'd recently been attacked," Loudons told him. "But how did you guess that it had been to the west of here, in a ruined city?"

"I never guess," the oldster with the silver bar and the keystone-shaped red patch on his left shoulder replied. "It is a shocking habit—destructive to the logical faculties. What seems strange to you is only so because you do not follow my train of thought.

"For example, the wheels and their framework under your flying machine are splashed with mud which seems to be predominantly brick-dust, mixed with plaster. Obviously, you landed recently in a dead city, either during or after a rain. There was a rain here yesterday evening, the wind being from the west. Obviously, you followed behind the rain as it came up the river. And now that I look at your boots, I see traces of the same sort of mud, around the soles and in front of the heels.

"But this is heartless of us, keeping you standing here on a wounded leg, sir. Come in, and let our medic take a look at it."

"Well, thank you, lieutenant," Loudons replied. "But don't bother your medic. I've attended to the wound myself, and it wasn't serious to begin with."

"You are a doctor?" the white-haired man asked.

"Of sorts. A sort of general scientist. My name is Loudons. My friend, Mr. Altamont, here, is a scientist, too."

There was an immediate reaction: all three of the elders of the village, and the young riflemen who had accompanied them, exchanged glances of surprise.

Loudons dropped his hand to the grip of his slung auto-carbine and Altamont sidled away from his partner, his hand moving as if by

accident toward the butt of his pistol. The same thought was in both men's minds, that these people might feel, as the heritage of the war of two centuries ago, a hostility to science and scientists.

There was no hostility, however, in their manner as the old man came forward with outstretched hand.

"I am Tenant Mycroft Jones, the Toon Leader here," he said. "This is Stamford Rawson, our Reader, and Verner Hughes, our Toon Sarge. This is his son, Murray Hughes, the Toon Sarge of the Irregulars.

"But come into the Aitch-Cue House, gentlemen. We have much to talk about."

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By this time, the villagers had begun to emerge from the log cabins and rubble-walled houses around the plaza and the old church. Some of them, mostly the young men, were carrying rifles, but the majority were unarmed. About half of them were women, in short deerskin skirts or homespun dresses. There were a number of children, the younger ones almost completely naked.

"Sarge," the old man told one of the youths, "post a guard over this flying machine. Don't let anybody meddle with it. And have all the noncoms and techs report here, on the double." He turned and shouted up at the truncated steeple: "Atherton, sound 'All Clear!'"

A horn up in the belfry began blowing, apparently to advise the people who had run from the fields into the forest that there was no danger.

They went through the open doorway of the old stone church and entered the big room inside. The building had evidently once been gutted by fire, two centuries ago, but portions of the wall had been restored. The floor had been replaced by one of rough planks, and

there was a plank ceiling at about ten feet.

The room was apparently used as a community center. There were a number of benches and chairs, all very neatly made; and along one wall, out of the way, ten or fifteen long tables had been stacked, the tops in a pile and the trestles on the tops.

The walls were decorated with trophies of weapons—a number of M-12 rifles and M-16 submachine-guns, all in good, clean condition; a light machine rifle; two bazookas. Among them were cruder weapons, stone-and metal-tipped spears and clubs, the work of the wild men of the woods.

A stairway led to the second floor, and it was up this stairway that the man who bore the title of Toon Leader conducted them, to a small room furnished with a long table, a number of chairs, and several big wooden chests bound with iron.

"Sit down, gentlemen," the Toon Leader invited, going to a cupboard and producing a large bottle stoppered with a corncob and a number of small cups.

"It's a little early in the day," he went on, "but this is a very special occasion.

"You smoke a pipe, I take it?" he asked Altamont. "Then try some of this, of our own growth and curing."

He extended a doeskin moccasin, which seemed to be the tobacco container.

Altamont looked at the thing dubiously, then filled his pipe from it.

The oldster drew his pistol, pushed a little wooden plug into the vent, added some tow to the priming, and, aiming at the wall, snapped it. Evidently, at time the formality of plugging the vent had been overlooked: there were a number of holes in the wall there.

This time, however, the pistol didn't go off. The old man shook out the smoldering tow, blew it into flame, and lit a candle from it, offering the light to Altamont.

Loudons got out a cigar and lit it from the candle; the others filled and lighted pipes. The Toon Leader reprimed his pistol, then holstered it, took off his belt and laid it aside, an example the others followed.

They drank ceremoniously, and then seated themselves at the table. As they did, two more men entered the room. They were introduced as Alexander Barrett, the gunsmith and Stanley Markovitch, the distiller.

The Toon Leader began by asking, "You come, then, from the west?"

"Are you from Utah?" the gunsmith interrupted, suspiciously.

"Why, no, we're from Arizona. A place called Fort Ridgeway," Loudons said.

The others nodded, in the manner of people who wish to conceal ignorance. It was obvious that none of them had ever heard of Fort Ridgeway, or Arizona either.

"You say you come from a fort? Then the wars aren't over yet?" Sarge Hughes asked.

"The wars have been over for a long time. You know how terrible they were. You know how few in all the countries were left alive," Loudons said.

"None that we know of, beside ourselves and the Scowrers, until you came," the Toon Leader said.

"We have found only a few small groups, in the whole country, who have managed to save anything of the Old Times. Most of them lived

in little villages and cultivated land. A few had horses or cows. None, that we have ever found before, made guns and powder for themselves. But they remembered that they were men, and did not eat one another.

"Whenever we find a group of people like this, we try to persuade them to let us help them."

"Why?" the Toon Leader asked. "Why do you do this for people that you have never met before? What do you want from them—from us—in return for your help?"

He was speaking to Altamont, rather than to Loudons. It seemed obvious that he believed Altamont to be the leader and Loudons the subordinate.

"Because we are trying to bring back the best of the Old Times," Altamont told him. "Look, you have had troubles, here. So have we, many times. Years when the crops didn't ... didn't...." He looked at Loudons, aware that his partner should be talking now, and also suddenly aware that Loudons had recognized the situation and left the leadership up to him....

"... years that the crops failed. Years of storms, or floods. Troubles with those beast-men in the woods.

"And you were alone, as we were, with no one to help.

"We want to put all men who are still men in touch with one another, so that they can help each other in trouble, and work together.

"If this isn't done, everything that makes men different from beasts will soon be no more."

"He's right. One of us, alone, is helpless," the Reader said. "It is only in the Toon that there is strength. He wants to organize a Toon of all Toons."

"That's about it. We are beginning to make helicopters, like the one Loudons and I came in. We'll furnish your community with one or more of them. We can give you a radio, so that you can communicate with other communities. We can give you rifles and machine guns and ammunition, to fight the—the Scowrers, did you call them? And we can give you atomic engines, so that you can build machines for yourselves."

"Some of our people,—Alex Barrett here, the gunsmith, and Stan Markovitch, the distiller, and Harrison Grant, the iron-worker—get their living by making things. How'd they make out, after your machines came in here?" Verner Hughes asked.

"We've thought of that. We had that problem with other groups we've helped," Loudons said. "In some communities, everybody owns everything in common and so we don't have much of a problem. Is that the way you do it, here?"

"Well, no. If a man makes a thing, or digs it out of the ruins, or catches it in the woods, it's his."

"Then we'll work out some way. Give the machines to the people who are already in a trade, or something like that. We'll have to talk it over with you and with the people concerned."

"How is it you took so long finding us?" Alex Barrett asked. "It's been two hundred or so years since the Wars."

"Alex! You see but you do not observe!" The Toon Leader rebuked. "These people have their flying machines, which are highly complicated mechanisms. They would have to make tools and machines to make them, and tools and machines to make those tools and machines. They would have to find materials, often going in search of them. The marvel is not that they took so long, but that they did it so quickly."

"That's right," Altamont said. "Originally, Fort Ridgeway was a military research and development center. As the country became disorganized, the Government set this project up to develop ways of improvising power and transportation and communication methods and extracting raw materials. If they'd had a little more time, they might have saved the country.

"As it was, they were able to keep themselves alive, and keep something like civilization going at the Fort, while the whole country was breaking apart around them.

"Then, when the rockets stopped falling, they started to rebuild. Fortunately, more than half the technicians at the Fort were women, so there was no question of them dying out.

"But it's only been in the last twenty years that we've been able to make nuclear-electric engines, and this is the first time any of us have gotten east of the Mississippi."

"How did your group manage to survive?" Loudons asked. "You call it the Toon. I suppose that's what the word platoon has become, with time. You were, originally, a military platoon?"

"Pla-toon!" the white-bearded man said. "Of all the unpardonable stupidities! Of course that's what it was. And the title, Tenant, was originally lieu-tenant. I know that, though we have dropped all use of the first part of the word. But that should have led me, if I had used my wits, to deduce platoon from toon."

The Tenant shook his head in dismay at his stupidity and Loudons found himself forced to say, "One syllable like that could have come from many words."

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# IV

The Tenant smiled at Loudons and said, "Your courtesy does not excuse our stupidity. We know our history and we should have identified the word accurately.

"Yes, we were originally a ... a pla-toon of soldiers, two hundred years ago, at the time when the Wars ended. The old Toon, and the First Tenant, were guarding POWs, and there, sir,"—to Loudons—"is a word we cannot trace. We have no idea what they were. In any event, the pows were all killed by a big bomb, and the First Tenant, Lieutenant Gilbert Dunbar, took his platoon and started to march to DeeCee, where the government was.

"But there was no government any more.

"They fought with people along the way. When they needed food, or ammunition, or animals to pull their wagons, they took them, and killed those who tried to prevent them. Other people joined the toon, and when they found women they wanted, they took them.

"They did all sorts of things that would have been crimes if there had been any law, but since there was no law, it was obvious that they could be no crime.

"The First Ten—Lieutenant—kept his men together, because he had The Books. Each evening, at the end of each day's march, he read to his men out of them."

Altamont knew without looking at his associate that Loudons would be inconspicuously jotting down notes. The last was an item the sociologist would be sure to record: the white-bearded Tenant had

pronounced that reference to a written testament in capital letters.

The story was continuing....

"... finally, they came here. There had been a town here, but it had been burned and destroyed, and there were people camping in the ruins.

"Some of them fought and were killed, others came in and joined the platoon.

"At first, they built shelters around this building and made this their fort. Then they cleared away the ruins, and built new houses. When the cartridges for the rifles began to get scarce, they began to make gunpowder, and new rifles, like these we are using now, to shoot without cartridges.

"Lieutenant Dunbar did this out of his own knowledge because there is nothing in The Books about making gunpowder. The guns in The Books are rifles and shotguns and revolvers and airguns. Except for the airguns, which we haven't been able to make, these all shot cartridges.

"As with your people, we did not die out because we too had women. Neither did we increase greatly—too many died or were killed young. But several times we've had to tear down the wall and rebuild it, to make room inside for more houses. And we've been clearing out a little more land for the fields each year.

"We still read and follow the teachings of The Books: we have made laws for ourselves out of them."

There was a silence during which Altamont felt himself to be the focus of attention; not obtrusively, but, nonetheless, insistently. However, this was Loudon's field and Altamont preferred not to speak.

"And we are waiting for the Slain and Risen One," Tenant Jones

added, and there was no doubt that he was looking at Altamont intently. "It is impossible that He will not, sooner or later, deduce the existence of this community, if He has not done so already."

Again the silence and lack of movement, broken by Loudons this time, when he picked up the candle to re-lit his cigar. Mentally, Altamont thanked his partner.

"Well, sir," the Toon Leader changed the subject abruptly, "enough of this talk about the past. If I understand rightly, it is the future in which you gentlemen are interested." He pushed back the cuff of his hunting shirt and looked at an old and worn wrist watch. "Eleven hundred: we'll have lunch shortly.

"This afternoon, you will meet the other people of the Toon, and this evening, at eighteen hundred, we'll have a mess together. Then, when we have everyone together, we can talk over your offer to help us, and decide what it is that you can give us that we can use."

"You spoke, a while ago, of what you could do for us, in return," Altamont said. He knew that now he would have to be the one to stress their original mission: Loudons would probably be so fascinated by this society that the sociologist might never remember the primary reason for coming to Pittsburgh.

"There's one thing you can do, no further away than tomorrow, if you're willing."

He had no time to wonder at the interchange of glances around the table before the Toon Leader said, "And that is—?"

"In Pittsburgh, somewhere, there is an underground crypt, full of books. Not printed and bound books, but spools of microfilm. Do you know what that is?"

The men of the Toon shook their heads. Altamont continued:

"They are spools on which strips of films are wound and on which pictures have been taken of books, page by page. We can make other, larger pictures from them, big enough to be read—"

"Oh, photographs, which you can enlarge. I can understand that. You mean, you can make many copies of them?"

"That's right. And you shall have copies, as soon as we can take the originals back to Fort Ridgeway, where we have the equipment for enlarging them. But while we have information which will help us to find the crypt where the books are, we will need help in getting it open."

"Of course! This is wonderful. Copies of The Books!" the Reader exclaimed. "We thought that we had the only one left in the world!"

"Not just The Books, Stamford, other books," the Toon Leader told him. "The books mentioned in The Books. But of course we will help you. You have a map to show where they are?"

"Not a map, just some information. But we can work out the location of the crypt."

"A ritual," Stamford Rawson said happily. "Of course!"

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# V

They lunched together at the house of Toon Sarge Hughes with the Toon Leader and the Reader and five or six of the leaders of the community. The food was plentiful, but Altamont found himself wishing that the first book they found in the Carnegie Library crypt would be a cook-book.

In the afternoon, he and Loudons separated.

Loudons attached himself to the Tenant, the Reader and an old woman, Irene Klein, who was almost a hundred years old and was the repository and arbiter of most of the community's oral legends.

Altamont, on the other hand, started with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, and Mordecai Ricci, the miller, to inspect the gunshop and the grist mill. They were later joined by a half dozen more of the village craftsmen and so also visited the forge and foundry, the sawmill and the wagon shop. Altamont additionally looked at the flume, a rough structure of logs lined with sheet aluminum; and at the nitriary, a shed-roofed pit in which potassium nitrate was extracted from the community's animal refuse.

But he reversed matters when it came to visiting the powder mill on the island: he became the host and took them by helicopter to the island and then for a trip up the river.

The guests were a badly-scared lot, for the first few minutes, as they watched the ground receding under them through the transparent plastic nose. Then, when nothing serious seemed to be happening, exhilaration took the place of fear. By the time they set down on the tip of the island, the eight men were confirmed aviation enthusiasts.

The trip up-river was an even bigger success, the high point coming when Altamont set his controls for Hover, pointed out a snarl of driftwood in the stream, and allowed his passengers to fire one of the machine-guns at it.

The lead balls of their own black-powder rifles would have plunked into the water-logged wood without visible effect. The copper-jacketed machine-gun bullets ripped it to splinters.

They returned for a final visit to the distillery awed by what they had seen.

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## VI

"Monty, I don't know what the devil to make of this crowd," Loudons said, that evening, after the feast, when they had entered the helicopter and were preparing to retire.

"We've run into some weird communities—that lot down in New Mexico who live in the church and claim that they have a divine mission to redeem the world by prayer, fasting, and flagellation.

"Or those yogis in Los Angeles—"

"Or the Blackout Boys in Detroit!" Altamont interrupted. He had good reason to remember them.

"That's understandable," Loudons said, "after what their ancestors went through in the last war. And so are the others, in their own way.

"But this crowd here!" Loudons put down his cigar and began chewing on his mustache, a sure sign that he was more than puzzled: he was a very worried man.

Altamont respected his partner's abilities in this area. However, he also knew that the best way to get his friend to work any problem was to have him do it in conversation.

"What has you stopped, Jim?"

"Number of things, Monty. They're hard to explain because—" the sociologist shrugged, winced a little as the gesture pushed his leg down on the edge of his bunk—"well, let me just mention them.

"These people are the descendants of an old United States Army

platoon, yet they have a fully-developed religion centered on a slain and resurrected god.

"Now, Monty, with all due respect to the old US Army, that just doesn't make sense! Normally, it would take thousands of years for a slain-god religion to develop, and then only in a special situation, from the field-fertility magic of primitive agriculturists.

"Well, you saw those people's fields from the air. Some members of that old platoon were men who knew the latest methods of scientific farming. They didn't need naive fairy tales about the planting and germination of seed."

"Sure this religion isn't just a variant of Christianity?"

"Absolutely not!

"In the first place, these Sacred Books cannot be the Bible—you heard Tenant Jones say that they mentioned firearms that used cartridges. That means they can't be older than 1860 at the earliest.

"And, in the second place, this slain god wasn't crucified, or put to death by any form of execution: he perished, together with his enemy, in combat, and both god and devil were later resurrected."

Loudons picked up his cigar again. "By the way, the Enemy is supposed to be the master-mind back of these cannibal savages in the woods and also in the ruins."

"Did you get a look at these Sacred Books, or find out what they might be?"

Loudons shook his head disgustedly. "Every time I brought up the question, they evaded me. The Tenant sent the Reader out to bring in this old lady, Irene Klein—she was a perfect gold-mine of information about the history and traditions of the platoon, by the way—and then he sent the Reader out on some other errand, undoubtedly to pass

the word around not to talk to us about their religion."

"I don't get that," Altamont said. "They showed me everything—their gunshop, their powder mill, their defenses, everything."

He smoked in silence for a moment, then added, in an apologetic tone, "Jim, I'm sure you've thought of this: the slain god couldn't be the original platoon commander, could he?"

"I've thought of it, and he isn't, Monty.

"No, definitely not, though they have the greatest respect for his memory—decorate his grave regularly, drink toasts to him, and so on. But he hasn't been deified. They got the idea for this god of theirs out of the Sacred Books."

Loudons put the cigar down again and returned to chewing his mustache. "Monty, this has me worried like the devil:

"I believe that they suspect that you are the Slain and Risen One!"

Altamont considered the idea, then nodded slowly. "Could be, at that. I know the Tenant came up to me, very respectfully, and said, 'I hope you don't think, sir, that I was presumptuous in trying to display my humble deductive abilities to you.'"

"What did you say?" Loudons demanded rather sharply.

"Told him certainly not, that he'd used a good, quick method of demonstrating that he and his people weren't like those mindless subhumans in the woods."

"That was all right," Loudons approved, but then his worries returned. "I don't know how we're going to handle this—"

"Jim, how about that pows business? Is there something there?"

"Monty!" Loudons voice was drily chiding as he took a pad of paper

and scribbled briefly. "Take a look and figure for yourself."

Altamont looked at the paper. Loudons had simply printed the first three letters of the word in capitals and separated each letter with a period. "Ouch! Yes, of course, that's what an infantry platoon would be guarding.

"Go ahead, Jim, this is your end of our business. I'll stay out of it and, especially, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"I don't think you'll be able to," Loudons said soberly. "As things stand now, they only suspect that you are their deity.

"And that means this: we're on trial here!"

"We have been in spots like this before, Jim," Altamont reminded his friend.

"Not like this, Monty, and let me explain.

"I get the impression here that logic, not faith, is the supreme religious virtue. And get this, Monty, because it's something practically unheard of: skepticism is a religious obligation, not a sin!

"I wish I knew...."

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## VII

Tenant Mycroft Jones, Reader Stamford Rawson, Toon Sarge Verner Hughes, and his son, Murray Hughes, sat around the bare-topped table in the room on the second floor of the Aitch-Cue House. A lighted candle flickered in the cool breeze that came in through the open window, throwing their shadows back and forth on the walls.

"Pass the tantalus, Murray," the Tenant said, and the youngest of the four handed the corncob-corked bottle to the eldest. Tenant Jones filled his cup and then sat staring at it, while Verner Hughes thrust his pipe into the toe of the moccasin and filled it. Finally, the Tenant drank about half the clear, wild-plum brandy.

"Gentlemen, I am baffled," he confessed. "We have three alternate possibilities here and we dare not disregard any of them.

"Either this man who calls himself Altamont is truly He, or his is merely what we are asked to believe, one of a community of men like ours, with more of the old knowledge than we possess."

"You know my views," Verner Hughes said. "I cannot believe that He was more than a man, as we are. A great, a good, a wise man, but a man and mortal."

"Let's not go into that, now." The Reader emptied his cup and took the bottle, filling it again. "You know my views, too. I hold that He is no longer upon earth in the flesh, but lives in the spirit and is only with us in the spirit.

"But you said there were three possibilities, none of which can be eliminated. What was your third possibility, Tenant?"

"That they are creatures of the Enemy, perhaps that one or the other of them is the Enemy."

Reader Rawson, lifting his cup to his lips, almost strangled. The Hugheses, father and son stared at Tenant Jones in horror.

"The Enemy—with such weapons and resources!" Murray Hughes gasped. Then he emptied his cup and refilled it. "No! I can't believe that: he would have struck before this and wiped us all out!"

"Not necessarily, Murray," the Tenant replied. "Until he became convinced that his agents, the Scowrers, could do nothing against us, he would bide his time. He sits motionless, like a spider, at the center of the web; he does little himself; his agents are numerous.

"Or, perhaps, he wishes to recruit us into this hellish organization."

"It is a possibility," the Reader admitted, "and one which we can neither accept or reject safely. And we must learn the truth as soon as possible. If this man is really He, we must not spurn Him on mere suspicion. If he is a man, come to help us, we must accept his help; if he is speaking the truth, the people who sent him could do wonders for us, and the greatest wonder would be to make us again a part of a civilized community.

"And if he is the Enemy...." Rawson left the sentence unfinished, but his face was grim.

"But if he is really He," Murray said, a little diffidently, for he was not yet accustomed to being included in the council of the elders, "I think we are on trial."

"What do you mean, son? Oh, I see. Of course, I don't believe that he is, but that's mere doubt, not negative certainty. However, if I'm wrong, if this man is truly He, we are worthy of him, we will penetrate his disguise."

"A very pretty problem, gentlemen," the Tenant said, smacking his lips over his brandy, "for all that it may be a deadly serious one for us. There is, of course, nothing we can do tonight. But, tomorrow, we have promised to help our visitors, whoever they may be, in searching for this crypt in the city.

"Murray, you were to be in charge of the detail that was to accompany them. Carry on as arranged, and say nothing of our suspicions, but advise your men to keep a sharp watch on the strangers, that they may learn all they can from them.

"Stamford, you and Verner and I will go along. We should, if we have any wits at all, observe something."

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# VIII

"Listen to this infernal thing!" Altamont raged. "'Wielding a gold-plated spade handled with oak from an original rafter of the Congressional Library, at three-fifteen one afternoon last week—' One afternoon last week!" He cursed luridly. "Why couldn't that blasted magazine say what afternoon? I've gone over a lot of twentieth century copies of that magazine and that expression was a regular cliché with them."

Loudons looked over his shoulder at the photostated magazine page.

"Well, we know it was between June thirteen and nineteen, inclusive," he said. "And there's a picture of the university president, complete with gold-plated spade, breaking ground. Call it Wednesday, the sixteenth. Over there's the tip of the shadow of the old Cathedral of Learning, about a hundred yards away. There are so many inexactitudes, that one'll probably cancel out the other."

"That's so, and it's also pretty futile getting angry at somebody who's been dead two hundred years, but why couldn't they say Wednesday, or Monday, or Saturday, or whatever?"

Monty checked back in the astronomical handbook, and the photostated pages of the old almanac, then looked over his calculations. "All right, here is the angle of the shadow, and the compass-bearing.

"I had a look, yesterday, when I was taking the local citizenry on that junket. The old baseball diamond at Forbes Field is plainly visible, and I located the ruins of the Cathedral of Learning from that.

"Here's the above-sea-level altitude of the top of the tower. After

you've landed us, go up to this altitude—use the barometric altimeter, not the radar—and hold position."

Loudons leaned forward from the desk to the contraption Altamont had rigged up in the nose of the helicopter; one of the telescope-sighted hunting rifles clamped in a vise, with a compass and a spirit-level under it.

"Rifle's pointing downward at the correct angle now?" he asked. "Good. Then all I have to do is to hold the helicopter steady, keep it at the right altitude, level and pointed in the right direction, and watch through the sight while you move the flag around, and direct you by radio."

"Simple, if I had been born quintuplets!"

"Mr. Altamont! Doctor Loudons!" a voice outside the helicopter called. "Are you ready for us now?"

Altamont went to the open door and looked out. The old Toon Leader, the Reader, Toon Sarge Hughes, his son and four young men in buckskins with slung rifles were standing outside.

"I have decided," the Tenant said, "that Mr. Rawson and Sarge Hughes and I would be of more help than an equal number of young men. We may not be as active, but we do know the old ruins better, especially the paths and hiding places of the Scowrers. These four young men you probably met last evening, but it will do no harm to introduce them again.

"Birdy Edwards; Sholto Jiminez; Jefferson Burns; Murdo Olsen."

"Very pleased, Tenant, gentlemen. I met all of you young men last evening and I remember you," Altamont said. "Now, if you'll crowd in here, I'll explain what we're going to try to do."

He showed them the old picture. "You see where the shadow of a tall

building falls?" he asked. "We know the height and location of this building. Doctor Loudons will hold this helicopter at exactly the position of the top of the building and aim through the sights of the rifle, there. One of you will have this flag in his hand, and will move it back and forth. Doctor Loudons will tell us when the flag is in sight of the rifle."

"He'll need a good pair of lungs to do that," Verner Hughes commented.

"We'll use the radio. A portable set on the ground, and the helicopter's radio set," Altamont said.

To his surprise, he was met with looks of incomprehension. He had not supposed that these people would have lost all memory of radio communication.

"Why, that's wonderful!" the Reader exclaimed, when the explanation was concluded. "You can talk directly. How much better than just sending a telegram!"

"But, finding the crypt by the shadow, that's exactly like the—" Murray Hughes began, then stopped short. Immediately, he began talking about the rifle that was to be used as a surveying transit, comparing it with the ones in the big first-floor room at the Aitch-Cue House.

Locating the point where the shadow of the old Cathedral of Learning had fallen proved easier than either Altamont or Loudons had expected. The towering building was now a tumbled mass of slagged rubble, but it was quite possible to determine its original center, and with the old data from the excellent reference library at Fort Ridgeway, its height above sea level was known. After a little jockeying, the helicopter came to a hovering stop, and the slanting barrel of the rifle in the vise pointed downward along the line of the shadow that had been cast on that afternoon in June, 1993.

The cross-hairs of the scope sight centered almost exactly on the spot Altamont had estimated on the map.

Guiding himself by peering through the rifle-sight, Loudons brought the helicopter slanting down to land on the sheet of fused glass that had once been a grassy campus.

"Well, this is probably it," Altamont said. "We didn't have to bother fussing around with that flag after all. That hump over there looks as though it had been a small building, and there's nothing corresponding to it on the city map. That may be the bunker over the stair-head to the crypt."

They began unloading equipment—a small, portable nuclear-electric conversion unit, a powerful solenoid-hammer, crowbars and intrenching tools, tins of blasting plastic. They took out the two hunting rifles and the auto-carbines, and Altamont showed the young men of Murray Hughes' detail how to use them.

"If you will pardon me, sir," the Tenant said to Altamont, "I think it would be a good idea if your companion went up in the flying machine and circled over us, to keep watch for the Scowrers. There are quite a few of them, particularly farther up the rivers, to the east, where the damage was not so great and they can find cellars and shelters and buildings to live in."

"Good idea. That way, we won't have to put out guards," Altamont said. "From the looks of this, we'll need every body to help dig into that thing. Hand out one of the portable radios, Jim and go up to about a thousand feet. If you see anything suspicious, give us a yell, then spray it with bullets, and find out what it is afterward."

They waited until the helicopter had climbed to position and was circling above, and then turned their attention to the place where the sheet of fused earth and stone bulged upward. It must have been

almost ground-zero of one of the hydrogen-bombs: the wreckage of the Cathedral of Learning had fallen predominantly to the north, and the Carnegie Library was tumbled to the east.

"I think the entrance would be on this side, toward the Library," Altamont said. "Let's try it, to begin with."

He used the solenoid-hammer, slowly pounding a hole in the glaze, and placed a small charge of the plastic explosive. Chunks of the lava-like stuff pelted down between the little mound and the huge one of the old library, blowing a hole six feet in diameter and the two and a half feet deep, revealing concrete bonded with crushed steel-mill slag.

"We missed the door," Altamont said. "That means we'll have to tunnel in through who knows how much concrete. Well...."

He used a second and larger charge, after digging a hole a foot deep. When he and his helpers came up to look, they found a large mass of concrete blown out, and solid steel behind it. Altamont cut two more holes, one on either side of the blown-out place, and fired a charge in each of them, bringing down more concrete.

He found he hadn't missed the door after all. It had merely been concreted over.

A few more shots cleared it, and after some work, they got it open. There was a room inside, concrete-floored and entirely empty. Altamont stood in the doorway and inspected the interior with his flashlight; he heard somebody behind him say something about a most peculiar sort of dark-lantern.

Across the small room, on the opposite wall, was a bronze plaque.

The plaque carried quite a lengthy inscription, including the names of all the persons and institutions participating in the microfilm project. The History Department at the Fort would be interested in that, but the

only thing that interested Altamont was the statement that the floor had been laid over the trapdoor leading to the vault where the microfilms were stored. He went outside to the radio.

"Hello, Jim. We're inside, but the films were stored in an underground vault, and so we have to tear up a concrete floor," he said. "Go back to the village and gather up all the men you can carry. I don't want to use explosives inside. The interior of the crypt oughtn't to be damaged. Besides, I don't know what a blast in there might do to the film, and I don't want to take any chances."

"No, of course not. How thick do you think the floor is?"

"Haven't the least idea. Plenty thick, I would guess. Those films would have to be well-buried, to shield them from radioactivity. We can expect that it will take some time."

"All right. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The helicopter turned and went windmilling away, over what had been the Golden Triangle, down the Ohio. Altamont went back to the little concrete bunker and sat down, lighting his pipe. Murray Hughes and his four riflemen spread out, one circling around the glazed butte that had been the Cathedral of Learning, another climbing to the top of the old Library, and the others taking positions to the south and east.

Altamont sat in silence, smoking his pipe and trying to form some conception of the wealth under that concrete floor.

It was no use.

Jim Loudons probably understood a little more clearly what those books would mean to the world of today, and what they could do toward shaping the world of the future.

There was a library at Fort Ridgeway, and it was an excellent one ... for its purpose. In 1996, when the rockets had come crashing down, it

had contained the cream of the world's technical knowledge—and very little else. There was only a little fiction, a few books of ideas, just enough to give the survivors a tantalizing glimpse of the world of their fathers.

But now....

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A rifle banged to the south and east, and banged again. Either Murray Hughes or Birdy Edwards: it was one of the two hunting rifles from the helicopter.

On the heels of the reports, they heard a voice shouting, "Scowrsers! A lot of them, coming from up the river!"

A moment later, there was a light whip-crack of one of the muzzleloaders, from the top of the old Carnegie Library, and Altamont could see a wisp of grey-white smoke drifting away from where it had been fired.

Altamont jumped to his feet and raced for the radio, picking it up and bring it to the bunker.

Tenant Jones, old Reader Rawson, and Verner Hughes had caught up their rifles. The Tenant was shouting. "Come on in! Everybody, come on in!"

The boy on top of the library began scrambling down. Another came running from the direction of the half-demolished Cathedral of Learning, a third from the baseball field that had served as Altamont's point of reference the afternoon before.

The fourth, Murray Hughes, was running in from the ruins of the old Carnegie Tech buildings, and Birdy Edwards sped up the main road

from Schenley Park. Once, twice, as he ran, Murray Hughes paused, turned, and fired behind him.

Then his pursuers came into sight!

They ran erect, they wore a few rags of skin garments, and they carried spears and hatchets and clubs, so they were probably classifiable as men. But their hair was long and unkempt, and their bodies were almost black with dirt and from the sun. A few of them were yelling, but most of them ran silently. They ran more swiftly than the boy they were pursuing: the distance between them narrowed every moment. There were at least fifty of them.

Verner Hughes' rifle barked, one of them dropped. As coolly as though he were shooting squirrels instead of his son's pursuers, he dropped the butt of the rifle to the ground, poured a charge of powder, patched a ball and rammed it home, replaced the ramrod. Tenant Jones fired then, and Birdy Edwards joined them, beginning to shoot with the telescope-sighted rifle.

The young man who had been north of the Cathedral of Learning had one of the auto-carbines; luckily, Altamont had providently set the control for semi-auto before giving it to him. He dropped to one knee and began to empty the clip, shooting slowly and deliberately, picking off the runners who were in the lead.

The boy who had started to climb down off the Library halted, fired his flintlock, and began reloading it.

Altamont, sitting down and propping his elbows on his knees, took both hands to the automatic which was his only weapon, emptying the magazine and replacing it. The last three savages he shot in the back: they had had enough and were running for their lives.

So far, everybody was safe. The boy in the Library came down through a place where the wall had fallen. Murray Hughes stopped

running and came slowly toward the bunker, putting a fresh clip into his rifle. The others came drifting in.

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"Altamont, calling Loudons," the scientist from Fort Ridgeway was saying into the radio. "Monty to Jim: can you hear me?"

Silence.

"We'd better get ready for another attack," Birdy Edwards said. "There's another gang coming from down that way. I never saw so many Scowrers!"

"Maybe there's a reason, Birdy," Tenant Jones said. "The Enemy is after big game, this time."

"Jim, where the devil are you?" Altamont fairly yelled into the radio; and as he did, he knew the answer. Loudons was in the village, away from the helicopter, gathering tools and workers.

Nothing to do but keep on trying!

"Here they come!" Reader Rawson warned.

"How far can these rifles be depended on?" Birdy Edwards wanted to know.

Altamont straightened, saw the second band of savages approaching about four hundred yards away.

"Start shooting now," he said. "Aim for the upper part of their bodies."

The two auto-loading rifles began to crack. After the first few shots, the savages took cover. Evidently they understood the capabilities and limitations of the villagers' flintlocks, but this was a terrifying

surprise to them.

"Jim!"—Altamont was almost praying into the radio—"Come in, Jim!"

"What is it, Monty? I was outside."

Altamont told him.

"Those fellows you had up with you yesterday, think they could be trusted to handle the guns? A couple of them are here with me," Loudons inquired.

"Take a chance on it! It won't cost anything but my life, and that's not worth much at the present."

"All right, hold on. We'll be there in a few minutes."

"Loudons is bringing the helicopter," Altamont told the others. "All we have to do is to hold on, here, until he comes."

A naked savage raised his head from behind what might, two hundred years ago, have been a cement park-bench and he was only a hundred yards away. Reader Rawson promptly killed him and began reloading.

"I think you're right, Tenant," he said. "The Scowrers have never attacked in bands like this before. They must have a powerful reason and I can think of only one."

"That's what I'm beginning to think, too," Verner Hughes agreed. "At least, we've eliminated the third of your possibilities, Tenant. And I think probably the second, as well."

Altamont wondered what they were double-talking about. There wasn't any particular mystery about the mass attack of the wild men to him.

Debased as they were, they still possessed speech and the ability to

transmit experiences. No matter how beclouded in superstition, they still remembered that aircraft dropped bombs, and bombs killed people, and where people had been killed, they would find fresh meat. They had seen the helicopter circling about, and had heard the blasting: everyone in the area had been drawn to the scene as soon as Loudons had gone down the river.

But they seemed to have forgotten that aircraft carried guns, although they did spring to their feet and start to run at the return of the helicopter.

However, most of them did not run far.

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# IX

Altamont and Loudons shook hands many times in front of the Aitch-Cue House, and listened to many good wishes, and repeated their promise to return. Most of the microfilmed books were to be stored in the old church. They were taking with them only the catalogue and a few of the most important works. Finally, they entered the helicopter. The crowd shouted farewell as they rose.

Altamont, at the controls, waited until they had gained five thousand feet, then turned on a compass-course for Colony Three.

"I can't wait until we're in radio range of the Fort, Jim. This is one report that I really want to make," he said.

"Of all the wonderful luck!" he went on. "And I don't know which is the more important: finding those books, or finding those people. In a few years, when we can get them supplied with modern equipment and instructed in its use—

"What's the matter, Jim? You should be even more excited than I am."

"I'm not very happy about this, Monty," Loudons confessed. "I keep thinking about what's going to happen to them."

"Why, nothing's going to happen to them. They're going to be given the means of producing more food, keeping more of them alive, giving them more leisure to develop themselves in—"

"Monty, I saw the Sacred Books."

"The deuce! What were they?"

it. One volume. A collection of works. We have it at the Fort and I've read it. How I ever missed all those clues—"

"You see, Monty, what I'm worried about is what's going to happen to those people when they find out that we're not really Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson...."

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