

JOHN
CHRISTOPHER

TRIPODS



POOL OF FIRE

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About the Book

The final battle for the Earth has begun, as the human resistance strikes back against their alien Tripod masters. Will Parker and his friends prepare to lead daring commando raids against the cities of the invaders, with nothing less than the fate of the world at stake.

THE TRIPODS

THE POOL OF FIRE

JOHN CHRISTOPHER

RHCP DIGITAL

To Shelia and Margret:
With love

Preface

What is the greatest gift any human being can possess?

It is not intelligence, strength, health, courage, good looks. These are all good to have, but without something else, something much deeper and more important, they are worthless.

Think of Helen Keller. Blind and deaf from infancy, she was trapped in a terrifying and hopeless isolation until someone found her, cared for her, and taught her how to communicate. She learned to speak, to read and write, and did all three things with great skill. She was eighty-eight when she died, after a life largely spent working to help others who were blind and deaf. Indeed we are all born into isolation and need others – usually our parents, fundamentally our mothers – to teach us that skill without which every other human gift is pointless: the skill of communication.

Now think about Will, and his Master in the City of Gold and Lead. The Masters, Will learns, lead much more separate lives than humans. In their world, for instance, there is no such thing as marriage, or children. They perpetuate their species through parthenogenesis, a kind of budding. To Will's Master the notion of such a thing as friendship is bizarre, and consequently, fascinating. In fact, he's so intrigued by it that he makes an attempt to establish such a relationship with Will. But friendship requires equality between the friends, and that's beyond him. Instead, he treats Will as a kind of pet.

But this defect (as we would see it) in the Masters has a positive side. Human beings communicate, but when their

communication fails or is inadequate, they get angry with one another. The world which the Masters found and conquered was one that was perpetually at war. This was something else they found baffling. They could never destroy themselves through warfare - as we have sometimes seemed to threaten to do.

Will thinks about this:

'I had wondered at one time why the Masters had taken the trouble to learn our languages rather than make the slaves learn theirs . . . My Master spoke German to me, but to other slaves from other lands he could speak in their language. It was a thing which amused him: the division of men into different races who could not understand each other. The Masters had always been part of one race, it seemed, solitary in themselves but yet part of a unity which men, even before they came, had shown small signs of achieving.'

The world into which Will is born, and in which he grows up, is not at first sight an unhappy one. Life goes on in tune with the changing seasons, peacefully and harmoniously. The Capped adults who surround him - his parents, their friends, even his cousin and best friend Jack - live lives which seem good to them. They are content with their loss of liberty because they do not understand what they have lost. Even the occasional sight of a Tripod stalking the horizon does not trouble them, because their minds have been conditioned to see the Tripods not as enslaving monsters, but as kind and protective gods.

Will himself is swayed by this vision during his stay at the Château de la Tour Rouge. Even after he discovers that the beautiful Eloise has been Capped - is fundamentally committed to the Tripods - he is tempted by the prospects that Eloise's mother, the Comtesse, sets before him. She tells him: 'You are not noble, but nobility can be granted. It lies in the gift of the King, and the King is my cousin.' Will's head spins with thoughts of what seems to lie ahead. 'I could have servants of my own, and horses, and armour

made for me so that I could ride in the tournaments, and a place in the family of the Comte de la Tour Rouge. . . .’

So when Henry and Beanpole are ready to move on, to continue their journey to the White Mountains where people are still free, Will holds back. Would it be so terrible to be Capped, if it meant enjoying such a good life, with the promise of marriage to Eloise to make it perfect? He tells his friends he will follow them later, but they do not believe him, and in his heart he doesn’t believe it himself. Only after Eloise is crowned Queen of the Games and tells him – gladly – that, as a result, she is to go to the City of the Tripods to serve them, is he shocked into realizing what he was on the point of doing, and into renewing his determination to fight for freedom.

But if humanity does succeed, against overwhelming odds, in winning the struggle – in defeating the Tripods and regaining freedom – what follows?

The wonderful capacity we have of relating to one another, however doubtfully and uncertainly, is also the root of our enmities. Love and hate are opposite sides of a coin, which has been endlessly tossed throughout human history without producing any final result. So there are two challenges which Will and his friends have to face. The most urgent one is to throw off the tyranny of the Masters – to regain freedom for mankind. But even if they achieve that, they are left with the problems that were there before the Tripods came: the problems of disunity and the horrors of war.

The second challenge is even bigger than the first, and more daunting. Can we be free, and still live together in peace? At the end of their adventures, it is understandable that Will and his companions should take an optimistic view.

We must all wish them well.

—John Christopher, 2003

One

A Plan of Action

Everywhere there was the sound of water. In places it was no more than a faint whisper, heard only because of the great stillness all around; in others, an eerie distant rumbling, like the voice of a giant talking to himself in the bowels of the earth. But there were places also where its rushing was clear and loud, and the actual torrent was visible by the light of oil lamps, flinging itself down dark rocky water-courses or spilling in a fall over a sheer edge of stone. And places where the water lay calm in long black reaches, its sound muted to a monotonous drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . which had continued for centuries and would continue for as many more.

I was relieved from guard to go to the conference, and so went through the dimly lit tunnels late and alone. The work of nature here mingled with the work of man. The earth's convulsions, and the action of long-dead rivers, had hollowed out these caverns and channels in the limestone hills, but there were marks of the ancients, too. Men had been here in the past, smoothing uneven floors, widening narrow gaps, sinking handrails into an artificial stone to aid and guide the traveller. There were also long ropelike cables, which had once carried the power called electricity to light bulbs of glass along the way. Our wise men, Beanpole had told me, had learned the means of doing this again, but needed resources that were not available to them

here – nor would be, perhaps, while men were forced to skulk like rats in the dark corners of a world governed by the Tripods, those huge metal monsters who strode on three giant legs across the face of the earth.

I have told already how I left my native village, at the urging of a strange man who called himself Ozymandias. This happened during the summer which was to have been my last before I was presented for the Capping ceremony. In that, boys and girls in their fourteenth year were taken up into one of the Tripods and returned later wearing Caps – a metal mesh that fitted close to the skull and made the wearer utterly obedient to our alien rulers. There were always a few whose minds broke under the strain of Capping, and these became Vagrants, men who could not think properly and who wandered aimlessly from place to place. Ozymandias had posed as one of them. In fact, his mission was to recruit people who would fight against the Tripods.

So I went, with my cousin Henry who also lived in my village, and later with Beanpole, a long journey to the south. (His real name was Jean-Paul, but we nicknamed him Beanpole because he was so tall and thin.) We arrived at last at the White Mountains, where we found the colony of free men Ozymandias had spoken of. From there, the following year, three of us were sent as a spearhead to penetrate into the City from which the Tripods came and learn what we could of them. Not quite the same three, however. Henry was left behind, and in his place we had Fritz, a native of the land of the Germans in which the City stood. He and I had got into the City, served as slaves of the Masters – monstrous three-legged, three-eyed reptilian creatures who came from a distant star – and learned something of their nature and their plans. But only I had escaped, plunging through the drain of the City into a river, and from there being rescued by Beanpole. We had waited, hoping Fritz might do the same, until, with snow falling and

winter coming on, we had been forced to return, heavy-hearted, to the White Mountains.

We had reached them to find that the colony had moved. This had been the result of a prudent decision by Julius, our leader. He had foreseen the possibility of our being unmasked by the enemy, and of our minds being ransacked once we were helpless in their grasp. So, without telling us of it, the plan had been formed to evacuate the Tunnel in the White Mountains, leaving only a few scouts to await our hoped-for return. The scouts had discovered Beanpole and myself, as we stared miserably around the deserted fortress, and had led us to the new headquarters.

This lay a long way to the east, in hilly rather than mountainous country. It was a land of narrow valleys, flanked by barren, mostly pine-wooded hills. The Capped kept to the valley floors, we to the ridges. We lived in a series of caves that ran, tortuously, for miles through the heights. Fortunately there were several entrances. We had guards on them all, and a plan for evacuation in case of attack. But so far all had been quiet. We raided the Capped for food, but were careful to have our raiding parties travel a long way from home before they pounced.

Now Julius had called a conference and I, as the only person who had seen the inside of the City – seen a Master face to face – was summoned from guard duty to attend it.

In the cave where the conference was held, the roof arched up into a darkness that our weak lamps could not penetrate: we sat beneath a cone of night in which no star would ever shine. Lamps flickered from the walls, and there were more on the table, behind which Julius sat with his advisers on roughly carved wooden stools. He rose to greet me as I approached, although any physical action caused him discomfort, if not pain. He had been crippled in a fall as a child, and was an old man now, white-haired, but red-

cheeked from the long years he had spent in the thin bright air of the White Mountains.

‘Come and sit by me, Will,’ he said. ‘We are just starting.’ It was a month since Beanpole and I had come here. At the outset I had told all I knew to Julius and others of the Council and handed over the things – samples of the Masters’ poisonous green air, and water from the City – which I had managed to bring with me. I had expected some kind of swift action, though I did not know what. Swift, I thought, it had to be. One thing I had been able to tell them was that a great ship was on its way, across space, from the home world of the Masters, carrying machines that would turn our earth’s atmosphere into air which they could breathe naturally, so that they would not have to stay inside the protective domes of the Cities. Men, and all other creatures native to the planet, would perish as the choking green fog thickened. In four years, my own Master had said, it would arrive, and the machines would be set up. There was so little time.

Julius might have been speaking to me, answering my doubts. He said, ‘Many of you are impatient, I know. It is right that you should be. We all know how tremendous a task we face, and its urgency. There can be no excuse for action unnecessarily delayed, time wasted. Every day, hour, minute counts.

‘But something else counts as much or more; and that is forethought. It is *because* events press so hard on us that we must think and think again before we act. We cannot afford many false moves – perhaps we cannot afford any. Therefore your Council has deliberated long and anxiously before coming to you with its plans. I will give you them in broad detail now, but each one of you has an individual part to play, and that will be told you later.’

He stopped, and I saw that someone in the semicircle in front of the table had risen to his feet. Julius said, ‘Do you

wish to speak, Pierre? There will be opportunity later, you know.'

Pierre had been on the Council when we first came to the White Mountains. He was a dark, difficult man. Few men opposed Julius, but he had done so. He had, I had learned, been against the expedition to the City of Gold and Lead, and against the decision to move from the White Mountains. In the end, he had left the Council, or been expelled from it; it was difficult to be sure which. He came from the south of France, from the mountains which border on Spanish land. He said, 'What I have to say, Julius, is better said first than last.'

Julius nodded. 'Say it, then.'

'You talk of the Council coming to us with its plans. You talk of parts to play, of men being told what they must do. I would remind you, Julius; it is not Capped men you are talking to, but free. You should rather come to us asking than ordering. It is not only you and your Councillors who can plan how to defeat the Tripods. There are others who are not lacking in wisdom. All free men are equal, and must be given the rights of equality. Common sense as well as justice demands this.'

He stopped speaking, but remained on his feet, among the more than a hundred who squatted on the bare rock. Outside it was winter, with even these hills mantled with snow, but, as in the Tunnel, we were protected by our thick blanket of rock. The temperature never changed here, from one day or season to another. Nothing changed here.

Julius paused for a moment, before he said, 'Free men may govern themselves in different ways. Living and working together, they must surrender some part of their freedom. The difference between us and the Capped is that we surrender it voluntarily, gladly, to the common cause, while their minds are enslaved to alien creatures who treat them as cattle. There is another difference, also. It is that, with free men, what is yielded is yielded for a time only. It is

done by consent, not by force or trickery. And consent is something that can always be withdrawn.'

Pierre said, 'You talk of consent, Julius, but where does your authority lie? In the Council. And who appoints the Council? The Council itself does, under your control. Where is the freedom there?'

'There will be a time,' Julius said, 'for us to discuss among ourselves how we shall be governed. That day will come when we have destroyed those who now govern humanity all over the world. Until then, we have no room for squabbling or dispute.'

Pierre began to say something, but Julius raised a hand and silenced him.

'Nor do we have room for dissension, or the suspicion of dissension. Perhaps what you have said was worth saying, whatever the motive with which you said it. Consent, among free men, is given and can be withdrawn. It can also be affirmed. So I ask: will any man who wishes to challenge the authority of the Council, and its right to speak for this community, rise to his feet?'

He stopped. There was silence in the cave, apart from the shuffle of a foot and the unending distant roar of water. We waited and watched for a second man to get to his feet. None did. When time enough had gone by, Julius said, 'You lack support, Pierre.'

'Today. But perhaps not tomorrow.'

Julius nodded. 'You do well to remind me. So I will ask for something else. I ask you now to approve this Council as your government until such a time as those who call themselves the Masters are utterly defeated.' He paused. 'Will those in favor stand up?'

This time, all stood. Another man, an Italian called Marco, said, 'I vote the expulsion of Pierre, for opposing the will of the community.'

Julius shook his head. 'No. No expulsions. We need every man we have, every man we can get. Pierre will do his part

loyally – I know that. Listen. I will tell you what we plan. But first I would like Will here to talk to you of what it is like inside the City of our enemies. Speak, Will.'

When I had told my story to the Council, I had been asked by them to keep silent to others for the time being. Normally this would not have been easy. I am talkative by nature, and my head was full of the wonders I had seen inside the City – the wonders, and the horrors. My mood, though, had not been normal. On the way back, with Beanpole, my energies had been taken up by the arduousness and uncertainty of the journey: there had been little time in which to brood. But after we had come to the caves it had been different. In this world of perpetual lamp-lit night, of echoing silences, I could think and remember, and feel remorse. I found I had no wish to talk to others of what I had seen, and what had happened.

Now, under Julius's instruction to speak, I found myself in confusion. I spoke awkwardly, with many stops and repetitions, at times almost incoherently. But gradually, as I continued with my story, I became aware of how closely they were all listening to it. As I went on, also, I was carried away by my recollection of that terrible time – of what it had been like to struggle under the intolerable burden of the Masters' heavier gravity, sweating in the unvarying heat and humidity, watching fellow slaves weaken and collapse under the strain, and knowing this would almost certainly be my own fate in the end. As it had been Fritz's. I spoke, Beanpole told me later, with passion and with a fluency that was not naturally mine. When I had finished and sat down, there was a silence in my audience that told how deeply the story had affected them.

Then Julius spoke again.

'I wanted you to listen to Will for several reasons. One is that what he says is the report of someone who has actually witnessed the things of which he tells. You have heard him, and you know what I mean: what he has described to you