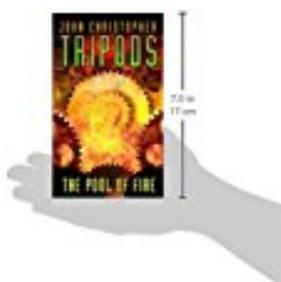


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About the Author

John Christopher (Sam Youd) was born in England in April 1922, during an unseasonable snowstorm. His early years were spent in Lancashire and Hampshire. He left school at sixteen to work as a local government clerk until being called up for army service in 1941, and spent the following four and a half years with the Royal Corps of Signals, in Gibraltar, North Africa, Italy, and Austria.

On leaving the army he renewed a teenage ambition toward being a writer, and in 1947, on the basis of an unfinished novel, won an Atlantic Award, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, which enabled him to devote himself to writing for a year. He tried to justify the award by writing serious novels, but subsequently also wrote detective thrillers, light comedies, novels based on cricket, and science fiction, to which he had been passionately devoted in his early teens. After several adult science fiction novels, he was asked to write for the young adult field, and ended up writing sixteen books in that genre, including *The Guardians*, *The Lotus Caves*, *Dom and Va*, *Empty World*, and the Sword and Fireball trilogies, as well as the Tripods trilogy. Following a BBC television series in 1984 based on the Tripods books, he wrote a prequel, *When the Tripods Came*, explaining how it all came about.

Sam Youd is a widower with five children and numerous grandchildren, and lives in Rye, in the county of Sussex, England. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Chapter 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 traveler. 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, heavyhearted, 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 he has seen. Another reason is to hearten you. The Masters are possessed of tremendous power and strength. They have traveled the unimaginable distances that lie between the stars. Their lives are so long that ours, by comparison, seem like the dance of mayflies for a brief day over a tumbling river. And yet..."

He paused, and looked at me with a little smile.

"And yet Will, an ordinary boy, no brighter than most, a trifle on the small side -- Will has struck at one of these monsters, and seen it collapse and die. He was lucky, of course. There is a place where they are vulnerable to a blow, and he was fortunate enough to discover it and to strike there. The fact remains that he killed one of them. They are not all-powerful. We can take heart from that. What Will managed by luck, we can achieve by planning and resolution.

"This leads me to my third point, my third reason for wanting you to hear Will's story. It is that essentially it is a story of failure." He was looking at me, and I felt myself flushing. He went on, calmly and unhurriedly: "The Master was made suspicious by finding in Will's room the notes he had made about the City and its dwellers. Will did not think the Master would go into his room, where he

would have to wear a mask to be able to breathe; but this was shallow thinking. After all, he knew his Master was one who took more care of his slaves than most, and knew that he had, before his own time, arranged for small extra comforts to be installed in the refuge room. It was reasonable that he might do so again, and find the book with notes in it."

His tone was level, considering rather than critical, but the more damning for that. My shame and embarrassment grew as I listened to him.

"Will was able, with Fritz's help, to salvage a great deal from the situation. He escaped from the City, and returned with information whose value to us is beyond computing. But still more could have been gained." His eyes were on me again. "And with time to plan things better, Fritz might have come back, too. He passed on to Will as much as he could of what he had learned, but it would have been better if he had been able to testify himself. Because every tiny item counts in the struggle."

Julius spoke then of the short time we had, of the ship already on its way toward us through the far deeps of space, and of the final death for all earthly things which it would bring with it. And he told us what had been decided by the Council.

The most important thing was to speed up -- tenfold, a hundredfold, eventually a thousand-fold -- our efforts to win the young, those still not Capped, to our side. To do this, as many as possible must go out, winning over and teaching young people, all over the world. Cells of resistance must be set up, and must create other cells. The Council had maps, and would give instructions where to go. Particularly, we must aim at establishing opposition groups in the neighborhood of the other two Cities of the Masters -- one thousands of miles across land to the east, the other on the far side of the great ocean to the west. There were problems of languages which would have to be overcome. There were other problems -- of survival, of organization -- which might seem, at first sight, insuperable. They were not insuperable, because they must not be. There could be no weakening, no despair, nothing but a determination to give every last ounce of energy and strength to the cause.

This course, obviously, involved a risk of alerting the Masters to the opposition that was developing. It was possible that they would not bother much about it, since their plan for extermination was so far advanced. But we had to be prepared for countermeasures. We must not have one headquarters, but a dozen, a hundred, each capable of carrying on by itself. The Council would split up, its members traveling from place to place, only meeting occasionally and with due precaution.

So much for the first part of the Plan -- the urgent need to mobilize all available forces for the struggle, and to reconnoiter and establish colonies within reach of all three enemy Cities. There was another part, perhaps even more important. Means had to be devised for destroying them, and this would involve much hard work and experimentation. A separate base was to be set up, but only those allotted to it would know where it was. That was where our ultimate hope lay. We dare not risk its discovery by the Masters.

"Now," Julius said, "I have told you what I can. Later, you will be given your individual instructions, and the things, such as maps, which you may need to carry them out. I will ask now: are there any questions, or suggestions?"

No one spoke, not even Pierre. Julius said:

"Then we can go our ways." He paused. "This is the last time we shall meet together, in such an assembly, until our task is completed. The only final thing I would say is what I have said already. That which we have to do is a tremendous and frightening task, but we must not let it frighten us. It

can be done. Yet it can only be done by each one giving his all. Go now, and God go with you."

It was Julius himself who gave me my instructions. I was to travel to the south and east, posing as a trader with a packhorse, winning recruits and seeding resistance, and reporting back to the center.

Julius asked, "Is it clear to you, Will?"

"Yes, sir."

"Look at me, Will."

I raised my eyes. He said, "I think you are still smarting, lad, from some of the things I said, after you had told your tale to the assembly."

"I realize that what you said was true, sir."

"But that does not make it easier to bear, when one has told a story of courage and skill and high endeavor, and finds it afterward painted a somewhat different color."

I did not answer.

"Listen, Will. What I did, I did for a purpose. The standards we set ourselves must be high, to a point of near impossibility. So I used your story to point a moral: that carelessness, in one man, can destroy us -- that enough is never enough -- that there can be no complacency, however much is achieved, because there is always more to achieve. But I can tell you now that what you did, you and Fritz, was of tremendous value to us all."

I said, "Fritz did more. And Fritz did not come back."

Julius nodded. "It is a thing you have to suffer. But what matters is that one of you came back -- that we did not lose a year out of the brief time we have. We all have to learn to live with our losses, and to use our regrets to spur us on in the future." He put a hand on my shoulder. "It is because I know you that I can say you did well. You will remember it, but you will remember my criticism more clearly and for longer. Isn't that true, Will?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I think it is true."

The three of us -- Henry, Beanpole, and I -- met at a place we had found where there was a fissure high up in the rock, through which a little weak daylight filtered -- just about enough for us to make out each other's faces without the need of lamps. It was some distance from those parts of the caves which were in general use, but we liked going there because of the reminder that the world outside, normally only glimpsed during guard duty at one of the entrances, really did exist: that somewhere there was light and wind and weather, in place of this static blackness and the rumble and whisper and drip of underground water. One day, when there must have been a violent storm blowing outside, a fine mist of rain was driven through the crack and filtered down into our cave. We turned our faces up to it, relishing the cool dampness, and imagining we could smell trees and grass in it.

Henry said, "I'm to go across the western ocean. Captain Curtis is taking us, in the Orion. He will pay off his crew in England except for the one who is false-Capped like himself, and those two will sail her down to a port in the west of France, where we shall join them. Six of us. The land we are going to is called America, and the people there speak the English tongue. What about you, Will?"

I told them briefly. Henry nodded, clearly thinking his own the better and more interesting mission. I agreed with him in that; but I did not care much either.

Henry said, "And you, Beanpole?"

"I don't know where."

"But they've allocated you, surely?"

He nodded. "To the research base."

It was what one should have expected. Beanpole, obviously, was the sort they would need to work things out for the attack against the Masters. The original trio, I thought, really would be split up this time. It did not seem to matter a great deal. My mind was on Fritz. Julius had been quite right: it was what he had said in criticism that I remembered and, remembering, was shamed by. With another week or so to prepare, we might both have escaped. It was my carelessness that had precipitated matters and led to Fritz being trapped. It was a bitter thought, but inescapable.

The other two were talking, and I was content to let them. They noticed this in time. Henry said:

"You're very quiet, Will. Anything wrong?"

"No."

He persisted. "You've been quiet altogether lately."

Beanpole said, "I read a book once about those Americans to whose land you will be going, Henry. It seems that they have red skins, and go about dressed in feathers, and they carry things like hatchets, and play on drums when they go to war and smoke pipes when they want to be peaceful."

Beanpole was usually too much interested in objects -- in the way they worked or could be made to work -- to pay any great attention to people. But I realized that he had noticed my unhappiness and guessed the cause of it -- after all, he had shared with me the vain wait outside the City, and the journey home -- and was doing what he could to distract Henry from questioning and me from brooding. I was grateful for that, and for the nonsense he was talking.

There were many things to do before I could set off. I was instructed in the ways of a packman, taught something of the language in the countries I would visit, advised on how to set up resistance cells and what to tell them when I moved on. All this I took in conscientiously, and with a determination to make no mistakes this time. But the melancholy I felt did not lift.

Henry left before I did. He went in high spirits, in a party that included Tonio, who had been my sparring partner and rival before we went north to the Games. They were all very cheerful. It seemed that everyone in the caves was, apart from me. Beanpole tried to cheer me up, but without success. Then Julius called me to see him. He gave me a lecture on the futility of self-recrimination, the importance of realizing that the only good lesson to be learned from the past was how to avoid similar errors in the future. I listened, and agreed politely, but the black mood did not lift. He said then:

"Will, you are taking this the wrong way. You are someone who does not easily bear criticism, and perhaps least of all from yourself. But to settle into such a mood is something that makes you less capable of doing what the Council requires of you."

"The job will be done, sir," I said. "And properly this time. I promise that."

He shook his head. "I am not sure that such a promise will serve. It would be different if you were of Fritz's temper. Yes, I will speak of him, even though it hurts you. Fritz was melancholic by nature, and could tolerate his own gloom. I do not think this is so with you, who are sanguine and impatient. In your case, remorse and despondency could be crippling."

"I shall do the best I can."

"I know. But will your best be enough?" He looked at me, in slow scrutiny. "You were to have started your journey in three days' time. I think we must delay it."

"But, sir..."

"No buts, Will. It is my decision."

I said, "I am ready now, sir. And we do not have the time to waste."

Julius smiled. "There was something of defiance there, so all is not lost. But you are already forgetting what I said at the last assembly. We cannot afford false moves, or plans or people who are not fully prepared. You will stay here a while longer, lad."

I think I hated Julius in that moment. Even when I had got over that, I was bitterly resentful. I watched others leave, and chafed at my own inactivity. The dark sunless days dragged by. I knew that I must change my attitude, but could not. I tried, attempting to put on a false cheerfulness but knew no one, Julius least of all, was deceived. At last, though, Julius called me back.

He said, "I have been thinking about you, Will. I believe I have found an answer."

"May I go, sir?"

"Wait, wait! As you know, some packmen travel in pairs, for company and so as to protect their goods better from thieves. It might be a good idea for you to have such a companion."

He was smiling. Angry again, I said, "I am well enough by myself, sir."

"But if it is a question of going with another, or staying here -- which will you choose?"

It was galling to think that he regarded me as unfit to be sent out on my own. But there was only one answer that it was possible to give. I said, not without sulkiness, "Whatever you decide, sir."

"That's good, Will. The one who is to go with you...would you like to meet him now?"

I could see his smile in the lamplight. I said stiffly, "I suppose so, sir."

"In that case..." His eyes went to the dark shadows at the edge of the cave, where a row of limestone pillars made a curtain of stone. He called:

"You can come forward."

A figure approached. I stared, thinking that the dimness of the light must be deceiving me. It was easier to disbelieve my eyes than to accept that someone had come back from the dead.

For it was Fritz.

He told me later all that had happened. When he had seen me plunge into the river that led out of the City, under the Golden Wall, he had returned and covered my traces as he had said he would, spreading the story that I had found my Master floating in his pool and had gone right away to the Place of Happy Release, not wishing to live once my Master was dead. It was accepted, and he was ready to make the attempt to follow me out. But the hardships he had suffered, together with the extra exertions of the night we had spent searching for the river, had taken their toll. He collapsed a second time, and a second time was taken to the slaves' hospital.

It had been agreed that, if I got out, I should wait three days for him to follow. More than that time had passed before he was fit even to rise from his bed, and he thought therefore that I would have gone on. (In fact, Beanpole and I waited twelve days before despair and the coming of the snow drove us away, but Fritz could not know that.) Believing this, he began, as was typical of him, to think the whole thing through again, slowly and logically. He guessed that the underwater plunge through the City's outlet vents must be difficult -- it would have killed me if Beanpole had not been on hand to fish me from the river -- and knew the weakness of his own condition. He needed to build up strength, and the hospital offered the best chance of doing that. While he was there, he could avoid his Master's beatings and the heavy tasks that normally were laid on him. He must, of course, be careful not to arouse suspicion that he thought differently from the other slaves, which meant that he had to calculate with care the length of time he could stay. He made it last a fortnight, shamming, for the others, a weakness which increased rather than diminished as the days went by; and then, sorrowfully, declared that he realized he could no longer serve his Master as a Master should be served, and so must die. He left the hospital late in the day, heading toward the Place of Happy Release, found somewhere to hide till night fell, and then made for the Wall and freedom.

At first, all went well. He came out into the river on a dark night, swam exhaustedly to the bank, and went south, following the route we had taken. But he was a couple of days behind us, and fell further behind when a feverish chill forced him to lie for several days, sweating and starving, in a farmer's barn. He was still desperately weak when he started again, and not long after was halted by a more serious illness. This time, fortunately, he was found and looked after, for he had pneumonia and would have died without care. A lady took him in. Her son, some years before, had turned Vagrant after his Capping. She cherished Fritz because of that.

At last, when he was well and strong, he slipped away and continued his journey. He found the White Mountains swept by blizzards, and was forced to hide out near the valley villages for some time before he could make his way painfully up through deep snow. At the Tunnel, he was challenged by the single guard that Julius had left there, just in case. The guard had led him, that morning, to the caves.

All this I heard from him later. At the moment of our meeting, I merely stared, incredulous.

Julius said, "I hope you and your companion will get on together. What do you think, Will?"

Suddenly I realized I was grinning like an idiot.

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