

The Armageddonists



H. Beam Piper, John J. McGuire, and David Johnson

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Based upon this public domain text¹:

"The Return," by H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire (1960)
(Expanded *Science-fictional Sherlock Holmes* edition²)

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Edited to conform with Piper's Terro-human Future History canon⁴.

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² "The Return," H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire, *The Science-fictional Sherlock Holmes*, Robert C. Peterson, ed., Denver, Council of Four, 1960, pp. 105-137.

³ "The Return," H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire, *Astounding Science Fiction*, Vol. LII, No. 5, January 1954, pp. 70-95,

⁴ As his commentary in "The Future History" (*Zenith*, May 4, 1964, edited by Peter Weston) makes clear, Piper's Terro-human Future History (TFH) canon is comprised of the stories "Omnilingual" (*Astounding Science Fiction*, February 1957), "Edge of the Knife" (*Amazing Stories*, May 1957), "The Keeper" (*Venture Science Fiction*, July 1957), "Graveyard of Dreams" (*Galaxy Science Fiction*, February 1958), "Ministry of Disturbance" (*Astounding Science Fiction*, December 1958), "Oomphel in the Sky" (*Analog Science Fact—Science Fiction*, November 1960), "Naudsonce" (*Analog Science Fact—Science Fiction*, January 1962), and "A Slave is a Slave" (*Analog Science Fact—Science Fiction*, April 1962), and the novels *Uller Uprising* (*The Petrified Planet*, Twayne, 1952), *Four-Day Planet* (Putnam, 1961), *Little Fuzzy* (Avon, 1962), *Space Viking* (originally serialized in *Analog Science Fact—Science Fiction*, November 1962, December 1962, January 1963, and February 1963), *The Cosmic Computer* (originally published as *Junkyard Planet*, Putnam, 1963), *Fuzzy Sapiens* (originally published as *The Other Human Race*, Avon, 1964), and *Fuzzies and Other People* (Ace, 1984). Additionally, those portions of Piper's story "When in the Course—" (*Federation*, Ace 1981), published posthumously, which are not duplicated in his non-TFH story "Gunpowder God" (*Analog Science Fiction—Science Fact*, November 1964) are also treated as part of the TFH canon. Finally, background material found in the authorized novels *Fuzzy Bones* by William Tuning (Ace, 1981) and *Golden Dream* by Ardath Mayhar (Ace, 1982) is also treated as canonical when it does not contradict Piper's own work.

I

MacBride cast a quick, routine glance at the instrument panels and then looked down through the transparent nose of the landing craft 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," Leibert said, "and that bowl of rice that's been taking up space in the cool-locker 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."

MacBride chuckled. That was Leibert, all right: he could take a few leftovers, mess them together, pop them in the skillet, and have a meal that would turn the chef back on the *Woomera* green with envy. He filled his cup and offered the pot.

"Coffee?" he asked.

Leibert held his cup out to be filled, blew on it, sipped, and then hunted on the ledge under the desk for his pack of cigarettes.

"Did you ever drink caffchoc, Mac?" the socio-psychologist asked, getting a cigarette drawing to his taste.

"Caffchoc? No. We'll have to organize an expedition to Hathor, sometime, to get seeds and try raising some."

Leibert blew smoke toward the rear of the cabin.

"A much overrated beverage," he replied. "We found some, once, when I was on that expedition to Irminsul, 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 coffee."

Leibert 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."

MacBride got out his own cigarettes, pulling one from the pack and lighting it slowly and carefully.

"Not a whisper. I tried Crew Three, over on Acaire, and I tried to call in the crew the *Woomera* landed on Koshchei before heading to the Beta System. I couldn't get either."

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

That was Leibert, too, MacBride thought. There wasn't a better man on the ship, 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 Leibert thought the same thing about machines: he couldn't psychoanalyze them.

MacBride gestured with his cigarette toward the nuclear-electric conversion unit, between the control-cabin and the living quarters in the rear of the landing craft.

"We have enough power back there to keep this floater in the air indefinitely," 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, 'MacBride calling *Woomera*.'"

"How far are we from Litchfield now?" Leibert wanted to know.

MacBride looked across the cabin at the big map of the Federation Member Republic of Poictesme as it had been, the red and green and blue and yellow patchwork of vanished administrative

districts. The colors gleamed through the transparent overlay on which this voyage of re-discovery was plotted.

The red line of their journey started at *Woomera's* landing site, at what had been the planetary capital, *Storisende*. It angled east by a little north, to *Lesmaizes*, in *Morven* district . . . gradually northeast to *St. Tara* and its lifeless ruins . . . then to *Yair* and *Ogde*, where little bands of Stone Age reversions stalked and fought and ate each other . . . *Giens*, where things that had completely forgotten they were human emerged from their burrows only at night . . . *Brunbelois*, where a couple of bombs must have landed in the lake and drenched everything with radioactivity that still lingered after two centuries . . . *Asch*, where vegetation was only beginning to break through the glassy slag . . . *Basardra*, 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 craft at a town, now choked with trees that grew among the tumbled walls. "I think that's *Evre*."

Leibert looked and shrugged, then looked again and pointed.

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

MacBride puffed slowly at his cigarette. "I wonder if we're going to find anything at all in *Litchfield*."

"You mean people, as distinct from those biped beasts we've found so far? I doubt it," Leibert replied, finishing his coffee and wiping his mustache with the back of his hand. "I think the whole eastern half of the continent 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," MacBride said. "I was thinking about whether or not that cache of microbooks that was buried at the *Fawzi Library* will help us to find *Merlin*."

"If there is a *Merlin*," Leibert qualified. "All we have is that article in that two-century-old copy of the *Storisende Herald-Guardian* about how the people at *Litchfield* had discovered the Old Federation battle computer *Foxx Travis* used to defeat the *System States Alliance* and had been operating it with the help of his former aide-de-camp, *General Shanlee*. We don't know what happened to *Merlin* once the bombs started landing."

They passed over a dam of flotsam that had banked up 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, Mac, I get nightmares, sometimes, thinking about what things must be like on *Terra*," Leibert said.

Five or six wild ungulates went crashing through the brush below. MacBride nodded when he saw them.

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

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

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

MacBride 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. Leibert was taking the landing craft 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 thermonuclears that had fallen on the Litchfield area, mentioned in the transcripts of the last news to reach Odin, the whole district had been pelted, more or less at random, with nuclear bombs.

West of the confluence of the Duardenez and Roigne rivers, it would probably be worse than this.

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

"Yes, it's a mess! Worse than Ogde, worse than Asch even.

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

Holding his cigarette in his mouth, MacBride 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."

Leibert 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 Keene! And I can see cleared ground, and what I think are houses, inside a stockade. . . ."

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 Scowrsers had begun 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 tea with a lump of 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.

Then he glanced toward the gunsmith's shop, and across the parade ground 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 realized, at that moment, that maybe his father and Alex Barrett and Reader Rawson and Tenant 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 ultimate fate of the False Soothsayer and the true nature of his First Master 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 bread, and glanced up at the sky. That was a queer bird; he had never seen a bird hover 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.

III

The stockaded village became larger, details grew plainer, as the landing craft 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 turret. It seemed to have been a temple, 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," Leibert pointed. "See the alternate strips of grass and plowed ground. These people understand soil conservation.

"They have here-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 here-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," Leibert 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," MacBride 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. . . ."

"Mac, 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 temple. That's probably the Executive Palace, or Government House, or Company House, or whatever."

MacBride 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 temple, all were silent and apparently lifeless as they set the landing craft down. Once Leibert 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 livestock. Sulfur probably from coal-mine drainage.

"Jim, this is really something!"

"I hope they don't cut loose with that thing," Leibert said, looking apprehensively at the brass-rimmed black muzzle that was covering them from the turret. "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 temple. They wore fringed leather trousers and leather shirts and caps of leather with visors to shade the eyes. 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 landing craft which had landed in their village.

Three other men followed them out. They, too, wore leather shirts and trousers and the visored caps. One had a close-cropped white beard, and on the shoulders of his leather shirt, he wore the single bars of a first lieutenant of the vanished Federation 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 landing craft.

"All right, come on, Mac."

Leibert opened the door and let down the steps. Picking up an auto-carbine, he slung it and stepped out of the landing craft, MacBride behind him. They advanced to

meet the party from the temple, halting when they were about twenty feet apart.

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

Leibert 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 with the bar and the trefoil-shaped patch on his left shoulder replied. "At least, you came in openly. "

" You've given us a better reception that we got at the city to the west of you a couple of days ago," Leibert admitted.

"You have a nasty rip in the left leg of your trousers, and the cloth around it is stained with blood." The oldster's brow narrowed in a frown. "Apparently, you have suffered a recent wound 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.

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

The white-haired man nodded. "You are a Terran?" he asked after a moment.

"No. An off-worlder though. My name is Leibert. "

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.

Leibert dropped his hand to the grip of his slung auto-carbine and MacBride sidled away from his partner, his hand moving as if by accident toward the butt of his pistol.

"My friend, Mr. MacBride, here, is an off-worlder, too." 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 off-worlders.

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

"I am Tenant Rodney 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."

IV

By this time, the villagers had begun to emerge from the log cabins and rubble-walled houses around the plaza and the old temple. Some of them, mostly the young men, were carrying rifles, but the majority were unarmed. About half of them were women, in short leather 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 turret: "Atherton, sound 'All Clear!'"

A horn up in the turret 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 temple 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 rifles and submachine-guns, all in good, clean condition; a light machine rifle; two portable rocket launchers. 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 cigarettes, I take it?" he asked MacBride. "Then try some of these, of our own growth and curing."

He extended a leather moccasin, which held several hand-rolled cigarettes.

MacBride looked at them dubiously, then reached in and took one 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 MacBride.

Leibert got out his own cigarette and lit it from the candle; the others pulled out similar moccasins and lit up. 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 off-world?"

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

"Why, no, we're from Odin. A planet that broke from the Old Federation," Leibert 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 Odin.

"You say you broke from Terra? 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. Few on this world were left alive," Leibert 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 world, who have managed to save anything of the Old Times. Most of them lived in little villages and cultivated land. A few had livestock. 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 MacBride, rather than to Leibert. It seemed obvious that he believed MacBride to be the leader and Leibert the subordinate.

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

Leibert had recognized the situation and left the leadership up to him. . . .

". . . years that the crops failed. Years of storms, or floods. Troubles with the 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 share contragravity craft, smaller versions of the craft Leibert 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," Leibert said. "On some worlds, 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?" Barrett asked. "It's been two hundred or so years since the Wars."

"Alex!" 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," MacBride said. "Originally, Odin was a Federation world. As the Old Federation government became disorganized, the people of Odin set their own government up. This enabled them to defend themselves when the Wars came.

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

"Then, when the Wars came to an end, they started to rebuild.

"But it's only been in the last twenty years that we've been able to reach out to other planets, and this is the first time any of us have gotten this far away from home."

"How did your group manage to survive?" Leibert 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 Leibert found himself forced to say, "One syllable like that could have come from many words."

The Tenant smiled at Leibert 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 Cybernarchists, and there, sir,"—to Leibert—"is a word we cannot trace. We have no idea what they were. In any event, the Cybernarchists were all killed by a big bomb, and the First Tenant, Lieutenant Gilbert Dunbar, took his platoon and started to march to Story's End, 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 there could be no crime.

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

MacBride knew without looking at his associate that Leibert 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 Book about making gunpowder. The guns in The Book are rifles and shotguns and revolvers and airguns. Except for the airguns, which we haven't been able to make, these all shot cartridges.

"Though we were originally a military force, we did not die out because we 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 Book: we have made laws for ourselves from it."

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

"And we are waiting for the Lost Master," Tenant Jones added, and there was no doubt that he was looking at MacBride intently. "It is impossible that He will not, sooner or later, assay the mettle of this community, if He has not done so already."

Again the silence and lack of movement, broken by Leibert this time,

when he picked up the candle to re-lit his cigarette. Mentally, MacBride 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 mechanical timepiece. "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," MacBride said. He knew that now he would have to be the one to stress their original mission: Leibert would probably be so fascinated by this society that the sociologist might never remember the primary reason for coming to Litchfield.

"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 Litchfield, somewhere, there is an underground crypt, full of books. Not printed and bound books, but electronic microbooks. Do you know what those are?"

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

"They are devices on which tiny 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 our ship, where we have the equipment for enlarging them. But while we have information which will help us to find the crypt where the microbooks are, we will need help in getting it open."

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

"Not just The Book, Stamford, *other* books," the Toon Leader told him. "The books mentioned in The Book. 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," Rawson said happily. "Of course!"

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 MacBride found himself wishing that the first book they found in the Fawzi Library crypt would be a cook-book.

In the afternoon, he and Leibert separated.

Leibert 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.

MacBride, 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. MacBride 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 landing craft 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 contragravity enthusiasts.

The trip up-river was an even bigger success, the high point coming when MacBride 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.

VI

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

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

"Or those yogis on Loki—"

"Or the Blackout Boys on Gimli!" MacBride interrupted. He had good reason to remember them.

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

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

MacBride 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, Mac. 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 Federation Army platoon, yet they have a fully-developed religion centered on a creator god.

"Now, Mac, with all due respect to the old Federation Army, that just doesn't make sense! Normally, it would take *thousands* of years for a creator-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, this Sacred Book cannot be the Bible—you heard Tenant Jones say that it mentioned firearms that used cartridges. That means it can't be older than the First Century, Pre-Atomic, at the earliest.

"And, in the second place, this creator god wasn't the creator of the world and people: he created his enemy, and both god and devil later disappeared."

Leibert picked up his cigarette 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 this Sacred Book, or find out what it might be?"

Leibert 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," MacBride 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 creator god couldn't be the original platoon commander, could he?"

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

"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 Book."

Leibert put the cigarette down again and returned to chewing his mustache. "Mac, this has me worried like the devil:

"I believe that they suspect that *you* are the Lost Master!"

MacBride 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 insubordinate in not immediately turning over leadership of the Toon to *you*.'"

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

"Told him certainly not, that he and his people had developed bonds which had withstood the test of centuries."

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

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

"Not sure," Leibert was briefly pensive. Probably some insurgent militia during the collapse of Old Federation authority."

MacBride looked out the port at the watch fires of the stockade. "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," Leibert 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," MacBride reminded his friend.

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

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

"I wish I knew. . . ."

VII

Tenant Jones, Reader Rawson, Toon Sarge Hughes, and his son, Murray, 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 flagon, 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 reached into his moccasin and retrieved another cigarette. Finally, the Tenant drank about half the clear, wild-melon 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 MacBride 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 False Soothsayer—with such weapons and resources!" Murray 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

suspicious, 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, learn something as well."

VIII

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

Leibert looked over his shoulder at the photostated newspaper page.

"Well, we know it was between June thirteen and nineteen, inclusive," he said. "And there's a picture of the Litchfield mayor, complete with gold-plated spade, breaking ground. Call it Wednesday, the sixteenth. Over there's the tip of the shadow of the old Litchfield Academy, 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?"

Mac checked back in the astronomical reference, 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 collapsed Airport Building is plainly visible, and I located the ruins of the Litchfield Academy 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."

Leibert leaned forward from the desk to the contraption MacBride had rigged up in the nose of the landing craft; 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 landing craft 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. MacBride! Mr. Leibert!" a voice outside the landing craft called. "Are you ready for us now?"

MacBride went to the open door and looked out. The old Toon Leader, the Reader, Toon Sarge Hughes, his son and four young men in leather shirts and trousers 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 Scowlers. 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 remember all of you young men from last evening," MacBride 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. Mr. Leibert will hold this landing craft 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. Mr. Leibert

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 landing craft's radio set," MacBride 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!"

"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 Litchfield Academy had fallen proved easier than either MacBride or Leibert 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 aboard *Woomera*, its height above sea level was known. After a little jockeying, the landing craft 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, 893 AE.

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

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

"Well, this is probably it," MacBride 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 MacBride showed the young men of Murray Hughes' detail how to use them.

"If you will pardon me, sir," the Tenant said to MacBride, "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 Scowlers. 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," MacBride 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 landing craft 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 thermonuclears: the wreckage of the Litchfield Academy had fallen predominantly to the north, and the Fawzi Library was tumbled to the east.

"I think the entrance would be on this side, toward the Library," MacBride 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 two and a half feet deep, revealing concrete bonded with crushed steel-mill slag.

"We missed the door," MacBride 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. MacBride 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. MacBride 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 microbook project. The History Department at the University of Asgard would be interested in that, but the only thing that interested MacBride was the statement that the floor had been laid over the trapdoor leading to the vault where the microbooks were stored. He went outside to the radio.

"Hello, Jim. We're inside, but the books 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 books, 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 books 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 landing craft turned and went soaring away, down the river. MacBride went back to the little concrete bunker and sat down, lighting a cigarette. Murray Hughes and his four riflemen spread out, one circling around the glazed butte that had been the Litchfield Academy, another climbing to the top of the old Library, and the others taking positions to the south and east.

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

It was no use.

Leibert probably understood a little more clearly what those books might mean to the University scholars, and what they could do toward resolving the mystery of the lost battle computer.

There was a library at the University, and it was an excellent one . . . for its purpose. In 996 AE, when Odin seceded from the Old Federation, it had contained the cream of Odin's knowledge—and very little about the System States War. There was even less about Poictesme and the hunt for Merlin, just enough to give a tantalizing glimpse of Foxx Travis's fabled computer.

But now. . .

IX

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 landing craft.

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 Fawzi Library, and MacBride could see a wisp of grey-white smoke drifting away from where it had been fired.

MacBride 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 Litchfield Academy, a third from the collapsed Airport Building that had served as MacBride's point of reference the afternoon before.

The fourth, Murray Hughes, was running in from the ruins of some old office buildings, and Birdy Edwards sped up the main road from what must have been a park. Once, twice, as he ran, Murray 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. 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 Litchfield Academy had one of the auto-carbines; luckily, MacBride 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.

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

"MacBride, calling Leibert," the scientist from Odin was saying into the radio. "Mac 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 Scowrsers!"

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

"Jim, where the devil are you?" MacBride fairly yelled into the radio; and as he did, he knew the answer. Leibert was in the village, away from the landing craft, 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.

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

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

MacBride 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," Leibert 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."

"Leibert is bringing the landing craft," MacBride 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."

MacBride 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 flying machines dropped bombs, and bombs killed people, and where people had been killed, they would find fresh meat. They had seen the landing craft circling about, and had heard the blasting: everyone in the area had been drawn to the scene as soon as Leibert had gone down the river.

But they seemed to have forgotten that flying machines carried guns, although they did spring to their feet and start to run at the return of the landing craft.

However, most of them did not run far.

X

MacBride and Leibert 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 microbooks were to be stored in the old temple. They were taking with them only the catalogue and a few of the most important works. Finally, they entered the landing craft. The crowd shouted farewell as they rose.

MacBride, at the controls, waited until they had gained five thousand feet, then turned on a compass-course for the rendezvous point at Storisende.

"I can't wait until we're in radio range of the ship, 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, Mac," Leibert 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—"

"Mac, I saw the Sacred Book."

"Really? What was it?"

"A biography of sorts. A fictionalized account of the life of Kurt Fawzi, President of the Republic and discoverer of Merlin, the False Soothsayer—"

"You see, Mac, what I'm worried about is what's going to happen to those people when they find out that we're not really Foxx Travis and Mike Shanlee. . . ."