



The White Mountains (The Tripods Book 1)

By John Christopher

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Monstrous machines rule the Earth, but a few humans are fighting for freedom in this repackaged start to a classic alien trilogy ideal for fans of Rick Yancey's *The 5th Wave*.

Will Parker never dreamed he would be the one to rebel against the Tripods. With the approach of his thirteenth birthday, he expected to attend his Capping ceremony as planned and to become connected to the Tripods—huge three-legged machines—that now control all of Earth. But after an encounter with a strange homeless man called Beanpole, Will sets out for the White Mountains, where people are said to be free from the control of the Tripods.

But even with the help of Beanpole and his friends, the journey is long and hard. And with the Tripods hunting for anyone who tries to break free, Will must reach the White Mountains fast. But the longer he's away from his home, the more the Tripods look for him...and no one can hide from the monstrous machines forever.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

John Christopher was the pseudonym of Samuel Youd, who was born in Lancashire, England, in 1922. He was the author of more than fifty novels and novellas, as well as numerous short stories. His most famous books include *The Death of Grass*, the Tripods trilogy, *The Lotus Caves*, and *The Guardians*.

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The White Mountains

ONE

CAPPING DAY

Apart from the one in the church tower, there were five clocks in the village that kept reasonable time, and my father owned one of them. It stood on the mantelpiece in the parlor, and every night before he went to bed he took the key from a vase, and wound it up. Once a year the clockman came from Winchester, on an old jogging packhorse, to clean and oil it and put it right. Afterward he would drink camomile tea with my mother, and tell her the news of the city and what he had learned in the villages through which he had passed. My father, if he were not busy milling, would stalk out at this time, with some contemptuous remark about gossip; but later, in the evening, I would hear my mother passing the stories on to him. He did not show much enthusiasm, but he listened to them.

My father's great treasure, though, was not the clock, but the Watch. This, a miniature clock with a dial less than an inch across and a circlet permitting it to be worn on the wrist, was kept in a locked drawer of his desk; and only brought out to be worn on ceremonial occasions, like Harvest Festival, or a Capping. The clockman was only allowed to see to it every third year, and at such times my father stood by, watching him as he worked. There was no other Watch in the village, nor in any of the villages round about. The clockman said there were a number in Winchester, but none as fine as this. I wondered if he said it to please my father, who certainly showed pleasure in the hearing, but I believe it truly was of very good workmanship. The body of the Watch was of a steel much superior to anything they could make at the forge in Alton, and the works inside were a wonder of intricacy and skill. On the front was printed "Anti-magnetique Incabloc," which we supposed must have been the name of the craftsman who made it in olden times.

The clockman had visited us the week before, and I had been permitted to look on for a time while he cleaned and oiled the Watch. The sight fascinated me, and after he had gone I found my thoughts running continually on this treasure, now locked away again in its drawer. I was, of course, forbidden to touch my father's desk and the notion of opening a locked drawer in it should have been unthinkable. Nonetheless, the idea persisted. And after a day or two, I admitted to myself that it was only the fear of being caught that prevented me.

On Saturday morning, I found myself alone in the house. My father was in the mill room, grinding, and the servants—even Molly who normally did not leave the house during the day—had been brought in to help. My mother was out visiting old Mrs. Ash, who was sick, and would be gone an hour at least. I had finished my homework, and there was nothing to stop my going out into the bright May morning and finding Jack.

But what completely filled my mind was the thought that I had this opportunity to look at the Watch, with small chance of detection.

The key, I had observed, was kept with the other keys in a small box beside my father's bed. There were four, and the third one opened the drawer. I took out the Watch, and gazed at it. It was not going, but I knew one would it and set the hands by means of the small knob at one side. If I were to wind it only a couple of turns it would run down quite soon—just in case my father decided to look at it later in the day. I did this, and listened to its quiet rhythmic ticking. Then I set the hands by the clock. After that it only remained for me to slip it on my wrist. Even notched to the first hole, the leather strap was loose; but I was wearing the Watch.

Having achieved what I had thought was an ultimate ambition, I found, as I think is often the case, that there remained something more. To wear it was a triumph, but to be seen wearing it ... I had told my cousin, Jack Leeper, that I would meet him that morning, in the old ruins at the end of the village. Jack, who was nearly a year older than myself and due to be presented at the next Capping, was the person, next to my parents, that I most admired. To take the Watch out of the house was to add enormity to disobedience, but having already gone so far, it was easier to contemplate it. My mind made up, I was determined to waste none of the precious time I had. I opened the front door, stuck the hand with the Watch deep into my trouser pocket, and ran off down the street.

The village lay at a crossroads, with the road in which our house stood running alongside the river (this giving power for the mill, of course) and the second road crossing it at the ford. Beside the ford stood a small wooden bridge for foot travelers, and I pelted across, noticing that the river was higher than usual from the spring rains. My Aunt Lucy was approaching the bridge as I left it at the far end. She called a greeting to me, and I called back, having first taken care to veer to the other side of the road. The baker's shop was there, with trays of buns and cakes set out, and it was reasonable that I should be heading that way: I had a couple of pennies in my pocket. But I ran on past it, and did not slacken to a walk until I had reached the point where the houses thinned out and at last ended.

The ruins were a hundred yards farther on. On one side of the road lay Spiller's meadow, with cows grazing, but on my side there was a thorn hedge, and a potato field beyond. I passed a gap in the hedge, not looking in my concentration on what I was going to show Jack, and was startled a moment later by a shout from behind me. I recognized the voice as Henry Parker's.

Henry, like Jack, was a cousin of mine—my name is Will Parker—but, unlike Jack, no friend. (I had several cousins in the village: people did not usually travel far to marry.) He was a month younger than I, but taller and heavier, and we had hated each other as long as I could remember. When it came to fighting, as it very often did, I was outmatched physically, and had to rely on agility and quickness if I were not going to be beaten. From Jack I had learned some skill in wrestling which, in the past year, had enabled me to hold my own more, and in our last encounter I had thrown him heavily enough to wind him and leave him gasping for breath. But for wrestling one needed the use of both hands. I thrust my left hand deeper into the pocket and, not answering his call, ran on toward the ruins.

He was closer than I had thought, though, and he pounded after me, yelling threats. I put a spurt on, looked back to see how much of a lead I had, and found myself slipping on a patch of mud. (Cobbles were laid inside the village, but out here the road was in its usual poor condition, aggravated by the rains.) I fought desperately to keep my footing, but would not, until it was too late, bring out my other hand to help balance myself. As a result, I went slithering and sprawling and finally fell. Before I could recover, Henry was kneeling across me, holding the back of my head with his hand and pushing my face down into the mud.

This activity would normally have kept him happy for some time, but he found something of greater interest. I had instinctively used both hands to protect myself as I fell, and he saw the Watch on my wrist. In a moment he had wrenched it off, and stood up to examine it. I scrambled to my feet, and made a grab, but he held it easily above his head and out of my reach.

I said, panting, "Give that back!"

"It's not yours," he said. "It's your father's."

I was in agony in case the Watch had been damaged, broken maybe, in my fall, but even so I attempted to get my leg between his, to drop him. He parried, and, stepping back, said,

"Keep your distance." He braced himself, as though preparing to throw a stone. "Or I'll see how far I can fling it."

"If you do," I said, "you'll get a whipping for it."

There was a grin on his fleshy face. "So will you. And your father lays on heavier than mine does. I'll tell you what: I'll borrow it for a while. Maybe I'll let you have it back this afternoon. Or tomorrow."

"Someone will see you with it."

He grinned again. "I'll risk that."

I made a grab at him, I had decided that he was bluffing about throwing it away. I almost got him off balance, but not quite. We swayed and struggled, and then crashed together and rolled down into the ditch by the side of the road. There was some water in it, but we went on fighting, even after a voice challenged us from above. Jack—for it was he who had called to us to get up—had to come down and pull us apart by force. This was not difficult for him. He was as big as Henry, and tremendously strong also. He dragged us back up to the road, got to the root of the matter, took the Watch off Henry, and dismissed him with a clip across the back of the neck.

I said tearfully, "Is it all right?"

"I think so." He examined it, and handed it to me. "But you were a fool to bring it out."

"I wanted to show it to you."

"Not worth it," he said briefly. "Anyway, we'd better see about getting it back. I'll lend a hand."

Jack had always been around to lend a hand, as long as I could remember. It was strange, I thought, as we walked toward the village, that in just over a week's time I would be on my own. The Capping would have taken place, and Jack would be a boy no longer.

• • •

Jack stood guard while I put the Watch back and returned the drawer key to the place where I had found it. I changed my wet and dirty trousers and shirt, and we retraced our steps to the ruins. No one knew what these buildings had once been, and I think one of the things that attracted us was a sign, printed on a chipped and

rusted metal plate:

DANGER
6,600 VOLTS

We had no idea what Volts had been, but the notion of danger, however far away and long ago, was exciting. There was more lettering, but for the most part the rust had destroyed it. LECT CITY: we wondered if that were the city it had come from.

Farther along was the den Jack had made. One approached it through a crumbling arch; inside it was dry, and there was a place to build a fire. Jack had made one before coming out to look for me, and had skinned, cleaned, and skewered a rabbit ready for us to grill. There would be food in plenty at home—the midday meal on a Saturday was always lavish—but this did not prevent my looking forward greedily to roast rabbit with potatoes baked in the embers of the fire. Nor would it stop me doing justice to the steak pie my mother had in the oven. Although on the small side, I had a good appetite.

We watched and smelled the rabbit cooking in companionable silence. We could get on very well together without much conversation, though normally I had a ready tongue. Too ready, perhaps—I knew that a lot of the trouble with Henry arose because I could not avoid trying to get a rise out of him whenever possible.

Jack was not much of a talker under any circumstances, but to my surprise, after a time he broke the silence. His talk was inconsequential at first, chatter about events that had taken place in the village, but I had the feeling that he was trying to get around to something else, something more important. Then he stopped, stared in silence for a second or two at the crisping carcass, and said,

“This place will be yours, after the Capping.”

It was difficult to know what to say. I suppose if I had thought about it at all, I would have expected that he would pass the den on to me, but I had not thought about it. One did not think much about things connected with the Cappings, and certainly did not talk about them. For Jack, of all people, to do so was surprising, but what he said next was more surprising still.

“In a way,” he said, “I almost hope it doesn’t work. I’m not sure I wouldn’t rather be a Vagrant.”

I should say something about the Vagrants. Every village generally had a few—at that time there were four in ours, as far as I knew—but the number was constantly changing as some moved off and others took their place. They occasionally did a little work, but whether they did or not the village supported them. They lived in the Vagrant House, which in our case stood on the corner where the two roads crossed and was larger than all but a handful of houses (my father’s being one). It could easily have accommodated a dozen Vagrants, and there had been times when there had been almost that many there. Food was supplied to them—it was not luxurious, but adequate—and a servant looked after the place. Other servants were sent to lend a hand when the House filled up.

What was known, though not discussed, was that the Vagrants were people for whom the Capping had proved a failure. They had Caps, as normal people did, but they were not working properly. If this were going to happen, it usually showed itself in the first day or two following a Capping: the person who had been Capped showed distress, which increased as the days went by, turning at last into a fever of the brain. In this state, they were clearly in much pain. Fortunately the crisis did not last long; fortunately also, it happened only rarely. The great majority of Cappings were entirely successful. I suppose only about one in

twenty produced a Vagrant.

When he was well again, the Vagrant would start his wanderings. He, or she; because it happened occasionally with girls, although much more rarely. Whether it was because they saw themselves as being outside the community of normal people, or because the fever had left a permanent restlessness in them, I did not know. But off they would go and wander through the land, stopping a day here, as long as a month there, but always moving on. Their minds, certainly, had been affected. None of them could settle to a train of thought for long, and many had visions, and did strange things.

They were taken for granted, and looked after, but, like the Cappings, not much talked about. Children, generally, viewed them with suspicion and avoided them. They, for their part, mostly seemed melancholy, and did not talk much, even to each other. It was a great shock to hear Jack say he half wished to be a Vagrant, and I did not know how to answer him. But he did not seem to need a response. He said, "The Watch—do you ever think what it must have been like in the days when things like that were made?"

I had, from time to time, but it was another subject on which speculation was not encouraged, and Jack had never talked in this way before. I said, "Before the Tripods?"

"Yes."

"Well, we know it was the Black Age. There were too many people, and not enough food, so that people starved, and fought each other, and there were all kinds of sicknesses, and ..."

"And things like the Watch were made—by men, not the Tripods."

"We don't know that."

"Do you remember," he asked, "four years ago, when I went to stay with my Aunt Matilda?"

I remembered. She was his aunt, not mine, even though we were cousins: she had married a foreigner. Jack said, "She lives at Bishopstoke, on the other side of Winchester. I went out one day, walking, and I came to the sea. There were the ruins of a city that must have been twenty times as big as Winchester."

I knew of the ruined great-cities of the ancients, of course. But these, too, were little talked of, and then with disapproval and a shade of dread. No one would dream of going near them. It was disquieting even to think of looking at one, as Jack had done. I said, "Those were the cities where all the murdering and sickness were."

"So we are told. But I saw something there. It was the hulk of a ship, rusting away so that in places you could see right through it. And it was bigger than the village. Much bigger."

I fell silent. I was trying to imagine it, to see it in my mind as he had seen it in reality. But my mind could not accept it.

Jack said, "And that was built by men. Before the Tripods came."

Again I was at a loss for words. In the end, I said lamely, "People are happy now."

Jack turned the rabbit on the spit. After a while, he said, "Yes. I suppose you're right."

• • •

The weather stayed fine until Capping Day. From morning till night people worked in the fields, cutting the grass for hay. There had been so much rain earlier that it stood high and luxuriant, a promise of good winter fodder. The Day itself, of course, was a holiday. After breakfast, we went to church, and the parson preached on the rights and duties of manhood, into which Jack was to enter. Not of womanhood, because there was no girl to be Capped. Jack, in fact, stood alone, dressed in the white tunic which was prescribed. I looked at him, wondering how he was feeling, but whatever his emotions were, he did not show them.

Not even when, the service over, we stood out in the street in front of the church, waiting for the Tripod. The bells were ringing the Capping Peal, but apart from that all was quiet. No one talked or whispered or smiled. It was, we knew, a great experience for everyone who had been Capped. Even the Vagrants came and stood in the same rapt silence. But for us children, the time lagged desperately. And for Jack, apart from everyone, in the middle of the street? I felt for the first time a shiver of fear, in the realization that at the next Capping I would be standing there. I would not be alone, of course, because Henry was to be presented with me. There was not much consolation in that thought.

At last we heard, above the clang of bells, the deep staccato booming in the distance, and there was a kind of sigh from everyone. The booming came nearer and then, suddenly, we could see it over the roofs of the houses to the south: the great hemisphere of gleaming metal rocking through the air above the three articulated legs, several times as high as the church. Its shadow came before it, and fell on us when it halted, two of its legs astride the river and the mill. We waited, and I was shivering in earnest now, unable to halt the tremors that ran through my body.

Sir Geoffrey, the Lord of our Manor, stepped forward and made a small stiff bow in the direction of the Tripod; he was an old man, and could not bend much nor easily. And so one of the enormous burnished tentacles came down, gently and precisely, and its tip curled about Jack's waist, and it lifted him up, up, to where a hole opened like a mouth in the hemisphere, and swallowed him.

• • •

In the afternoon there were games, and people moved about the village, visiting, laughing, and talking, and the young men and women who were unmarried strolled together in the fields. Then, in the evening, there was the Feast, with tables set up in the street since the weather held fair, and the smell of roast beef mixing with the smells of beer and cider and lemonade, and all kinds of cakes and puddings. Lamps were hung outside the houses; in the dusk they would be lit, and glow like yellow blossoms along the street. But before the Feast started, Jack was brought back to us.

There was the distant booming first, and the quietness and waiting, and the tread of the gigantic feet, shaking the earth. The Tripod halted as before, and the mouth opened in the side of the hemisphere, and then the tentacle swept down and carefully set Jack by the place which had been left for him at Sir Geoffrey's right hand. I was a long way away, with the children at the far end, but I could see him clearly. He looked pale, but otherwise his face did not seem any different. The difference was in his white shaved head, on which the darker metal tracery of the Cap stood out like a spider's web. His hair would soon grow again, over and around the metal, and, with thick black hair such as he had, in a few months the Cap would be almost unnoticeable. But it would be there all the same, a part of him now till the day he died.

This, though, was the moment of rejoicing and making merry. He was a man, and tomorrow would do a man's work and get a man's pay. They cut the choicest fillet of beef and brought it to him, with a frothing

tankard of ale, and Sir Geoffrey toasted his health and fortune. I forgot my earlier fears, and envied him, and thought how next year I would be there, a man myself.

• • •

I did not see Jack the next day, but the day after that we met when, having finished my homework, I was on my way to the den. He was with four or five other men, coming back from the fields. I called him, and he smiled and, after a moment's hesitation, let the others go on. We stood facing each other, only a few yards from the place where, little more than a week earlier, he had separated Henry and me. But things were very different.

I said, "How are you?"

It was not just a polite question. By now, if the Capping were going to fail, he would be feeling the pains and discomfort that would lead, in due course, to his becoming a Vagrant. He said, "I'm fine, Will."

I hesitated, and blurted out, "What was it like?"

He shook his head. "You know it's not permitted to talk about that. But I can promise you that you won't be hurt."

I said, "But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why should the Tripods take people away, and Cap them? What right have they?"

"They do it for our good."

"But I don't see why it has to happen. I'd sooner stay as I am."

He smiled. "You can't understand now, but you will understand when it happens. It's ..." He shook his head. "I can't describe it."

"Jack," I said, "I've been thinking." He waited, without much interest. "Of what you said—about the wonderful things that men made, before the Tripods."

"That was nonsense," he said, and turned and walked on to the village. I watched him for a time and then, feeling very much alone, made my way to the den.

Users Review

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