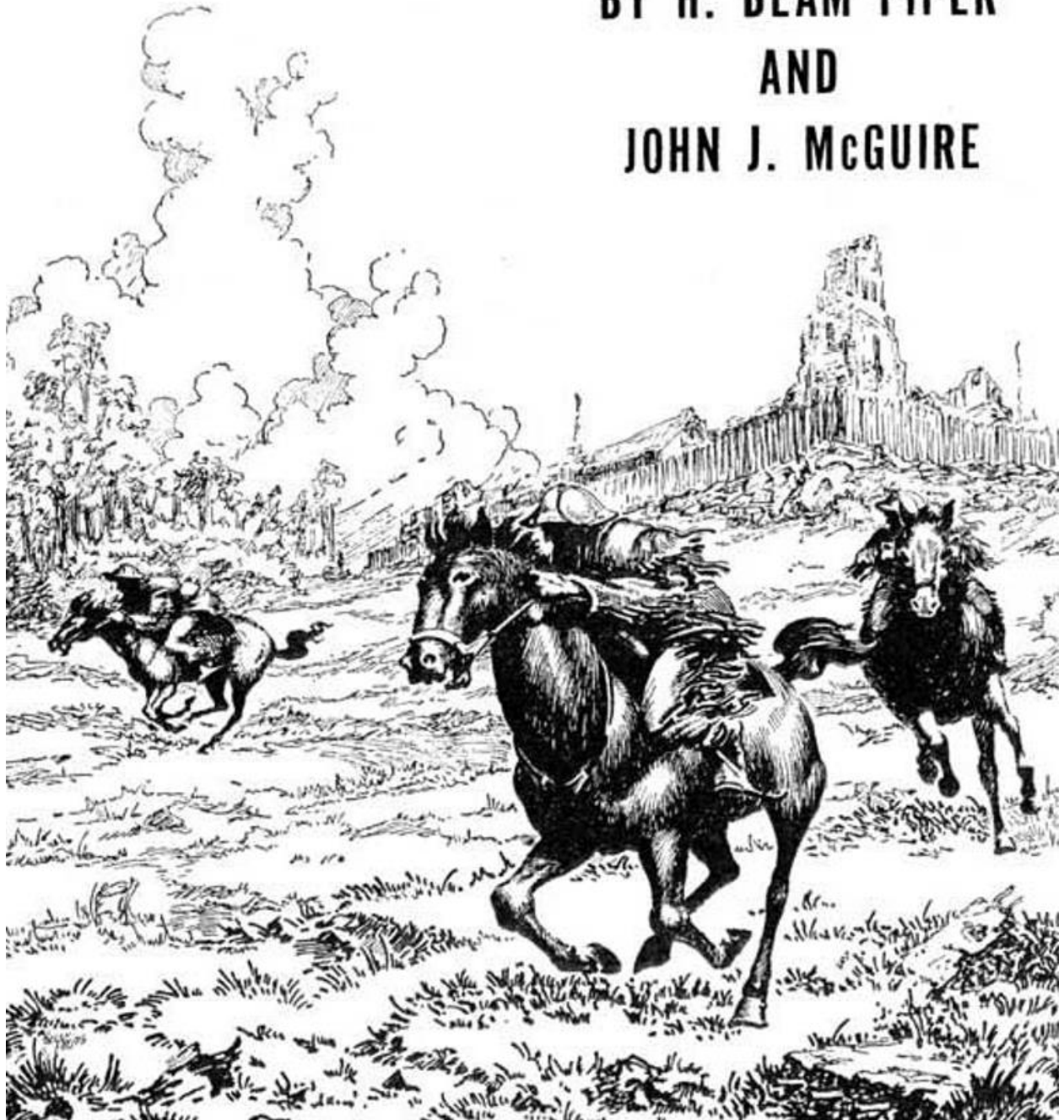




THE RETURN

BY H. BEAM PIPER
AND
JOHN J. MCGUIRE



THE RETURN

A BEAM PIPER AND JOHN J. MCGUIRE

PREFACE AND AFTERWORD BY JAMES BOJACIUK

18TH  WALL

THE RETURN: A NOVELLA OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

An 18thWall Productions book published by

arrangement with James Bojaciuk and Benjamin Kasson

The Return /

Edited by James Bojaciuk. —1st ed.

R...S.M.

verba mea in manibus

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Cover by Axel Medellin

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Many thanks to Ted Gregory,
Without whom this book would have been impossible.
(Indeed, I never would have known it existed.)
Thank you for your friendship.

Preface

James Bojaciuk

Let me pitch you a religion.

It's based on a single book, composed at different times by different authors. The central figure died and rose again, and this process was written about extensively by his follower. There are two kinds of scholars: conservative scholars, who are sane and focus on chronology and questions of culture, and liberal scholars who are raving mad and declare central figures to be women, to be homosexual, or to be figments of the popular imagination.

It is, of course, Sherlock Holmes. You and I both know very well what book you bought and, even if you have the deductive talent of a potato (or, in other words, Mr. Lestrade of the CID), you knew very well where that was heading.

But the similarities between Sherlock Holmes and the most famous of all the great religions bears some pondering—a line of pondering that H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire have picked up and examined at length. . .

Not every return is quite so literal as the first time Holmes came back from the dead.

The Return

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

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

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

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

“Caffchoc?” he asked.

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

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

“Coffee? No. I’ve read about it, of course. We’ll have to organize an expedition to Brazil, some time, to get seeds, and try raising some.”

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

“A much overrated beverage,” he replied. “We found some, once, when I was on that expedition into Idaho, in what must have been the stockroom of a hotel. Vacuum-packed in moisture-proof containers, and free from radioactivity. It wasn’t nearly as good as caffchoc. But then, I suppose, a pre-bustup coffee drinker couldn’t stomach this stuff we’re drinking.” He looked forward, up the river they were following. “Get anything on the radio?” he asked. “I noticed you took us up to about ten thousand, while I was shaving.”

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

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

“Maybe if we tried to get a little more power on the set—”

That was Loudons, too, Altamont thought. There wasn't a better man at the Fort, when it came to dealing with people, but confront him with a problem about things, and he was lost. That was one of the reasons why he and the stocky, phlegmatic social scientist made such a good team, he thought. As far as he, himself, was concerned, people were just a mysterious, exasperatingly unpredictable, order of things which were subject to no known natural laws. That was about the way Loudons thought of things; he couldn't psychoanalyze them.

He gestured with his pipe toward the nuclear-electric conversion unit, between the control-cabin and the living quarters in the rear of the box-car-sized helicopter.

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

“How far are we from Pittsburgh, now?” Loudons wanted to know.

Altamont looked across the cabin at the big map of the United States, with its red and green and blue and yellow patchwork of vanished political divisions, and the transparent overlay on which they had plotted their course. The red line started at Fort Ridgeway, in what had once been Arizona. It angled east by a little north, to Colony Three, in northern Arkansas; then sharply northeast to St. Louis and its lifeless ruins; then Chicago and Gary, where little bands of Stone Age reversions stalked and fought and ate each other; Detroit, where things that had completely forgotten that they were human emerged from their burrows only at night; Cleveland, where a couple of cobalt bombs must have landed in the lake and drenched everything with radioactivity that still lingered after two centuries; Akron, where vegetation was only beginning to break through the glassy slag; Cincinnati, where they had last stopped—

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

“Little stiff. Doesn't hurt much, though.”

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

Loudons looked and shrugged, then looked again and pointed.

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

Altamont puffed slowly at his pipe, “I wonder if we’re going to find anything at all in Pittsburgh.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe tomorrow, we’ll let down and shoot a cow,” he said. “I was looking in the freezer-locker; the fresh meat’s getting a little low. Or a wild pig, if we find a good stand of oak trees. I could enjoy what you’d do with some acorn-fed pork. Finished?” he asked Loudons. “Take over, then; I’ll go back and wash the dishes.”

They rose, and Loudons, favoring his left leg, moved over to the seat at the controls. Altamont gathered up the two cups, the stainless-steel dishes, and the knives and forks and spoons, going up the steps over the shielded converter and ducking his head to avoid the seat in the forward top

machine-gun turret. He washed and dried the dishes, noting with satisfaction that the gauge of the water tank was still reasonably high, and glanced out one of the windows. Loudons was taking the big helicopter upstairs, for a better view.

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

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

“Yes; it’s a mess! Worse than Gary; worse than Akron, even. Monty! Come here! I think I have something!”

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

“What is it?” he asked.

“Smoke. A lot of smoke, twenty or thirty fires, at the very least.” Loudons had shifted from Forward to Hover, and was peering through a pair of binoculars. “See that island, the long one? Across the river from it, on the north side, toward this end. Yes, by Einstein! And I can see cleared ground, and what I think are houses, inside a stockade—”



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, and 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; 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 Old 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 Scowrers. 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'd gone out before dawn, hunting into the hills to the north, they'd spent all day at it, and shot one small wild pig. Lucky it was small, at that. They'd have had to abandon a full-grown one, after the Scowrers began hunting them. Six of them, as big a band as he'd ever seen together at one time, and they'd gotten between them and the stockade and forced them 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. And he'd had words with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, just the other day. Not that Barrett wouldn't be more than glad to do business with him, once he saw that hard tool-steel he'd dug out of that place down the river. Hardest steel he'd ever found, and 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, and passed on through to the front porch, where his father was already eating at the table. The people of the Toon liked to eat in the open; it was something they'd always done, just as they'd always liked to eat together in the evenings.

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

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

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

To the table, sugar in his chicory, one foot on the bench, which had reminded him again of the absence of the hatchet from his belt and brought an automatic frown. Then the glance toward the gunsmith's shop, and across the parade ground, at 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 from the ruined building that marked the graves of the First Tenant and the men of the Old Toon. He had thought, in that moment, that maybe his father and Alex Barrett and Reader Rawson and Tenant Mycroft Jones and the others were right—there were too many things here that could not be moved along with them, if they decided to move.

It would be false modesty, refusal to see things as they were, not to admit that he was the leader of the younger men, and the boys of the Irregulars. And last winter, the usual theological arguments about the proper chronological order of the Sacred Books and the true nature of the Risen One had been replaced by a violent controversy when Sholto Jiminez and Birdy Edwards had reopened the old question of the advisability of moving the Toon and settling elsewhere. He'd been in favor of the idea himself, 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 corn bread, and glanced up at the sky. That was a queer bird; he'd never seen a bird with a wing action like that. Then he realized that the object was not a bird at all.

His father was staring at it, too.

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

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



The stockaded village grew larger, details became plainer, as the helicopter came slanting down and began spiraling around it. It was a fairly big place, some forty or fifty acres in a rough parallelogram, surrounded by a wall of varicolored stone and brick and concrete rubble from old ruins, topped with a palisade of pointed poles. There was a small jetty projecting out into the

river, to which six or eight boats of different sorts were tied; a gate opened onto this from the wall. Inside the stockade, there were close to a hundred buildings, ranging from small cabins to a structure with a belfry, which seemed to have been a church, partly ruined in the war of two centuries ago and later rebuilt. A stream came down from the woods, across the cultivated land around the fortified village; there was a rough flume which carried the water from a dam close to the edge of the forest and provided a fall to turn a mill wheel.

“Look; strip-farming,” Loudons pointed. “See the alternate strips of grass and plowed ground. Those people understand soil conservation. They have horses, too.”

As he spoke, three riders left the village at a gallop, through a gate on the far side. They separated, and the people in the fields, who had all started for the village, turned and began hurrying toward the woods. Two of the riders headed for a pasture in which cattle had been grazing, and started herding them, also, into the woods. For a while, there was a scurrying of little figures in the village below, and then not a moving thing was in sight.

“There’s good organization,” Loudons said. “Everybody seems to know what to do, and how to get it done promptly. And look how neat the whole place is. Policed up. I’ll bet anything we’ll find that they have a military organization, or a military tradition at least. We’ll have to find out; you can’t understand a people till you understand their background and their social organization.”

“Humph. Let me have a look at their artifacts; that’ll tell what kind of people they are,” Altamont said, swinging his 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. Undershot wheel, and it looks as though it could be raised or lowered. But the building’s too small for a grist mill. Now, I wonder—”

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

Altamont started to object, paused, and then nodded. “I think you’re right, Jim. From the way they scattered, and got their livestock into the woods, they probably expect us to bomb them. We have to get inside; 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 and the houses and cabins around it, and the two-hundred-year-old church, were silent and, apparently, lifeless as they set the helicopter down. Once Loudons caught a movement inside the door of a house, and saw a metallic glint. Altamont pointed up at the belfry.

"There's a gun up there," he said. "Looks like about a four-pounder. Brass. I knew that smith-shop was also a foundry. See that little curl of smoke? That's the gunner's slow-match. I'd thought maybe that thing on the island was a powder mill. That would be where they'd put it. Probably extract their niter from the dung of their horses and cows. Sulfur probably from coal-mine drainage. Jim, this is really something!"

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

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

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

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



“I must apologize, lieutenant, for dropping in on you so unceremoniously.” He stopped, wondering if the man with the white beard understood a word of what he was saying.

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

“Now how did you know we’d had trouble at Cincinnati day-before-yesterday?” Loudons demanded.

The old man’s eyes sparkled with childlike pleasure. “That surprises you, my dear sir? In a moment, I daresay you’ll be amazed at the simplicity of it. You have a nasty rip in the left leg of your trousers, and the cloth around it is stained with blood. Through the rip, I perceive a bandage. Obviously, you have suffered a recent wound. I further observe that the side of your flying machine bears recent scratches, as though from the spears or throwing-hatchets of the Scowrers. Evidently they attacked you as you were leaving it; it is fortunate that these cannibal devils are too stupid and too anxious for human flesh to exercise patience.”

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

“I never guess,” the oldster with the silver bar and the keystone-shaped red patch on his left shoulder replied. “It is a shocking habit—destructive to the logical faculty. What seems strange to you is only so because you do not follow my train of thought. For example, the wheels and their framework under your flying machine are splashed with mud which seems to be predominantly brick-dust, mixed with plaster. Obviously, you landed recently in a dead city, either during or after a rain. There was a rain here yesterday evening, the wind being from the west. Obviously, you followed behind the rain as it came up the river. And now that I look at your boots, I see traces of the same sort of mud, around the soles and in front of the heels. But this is heartless of us, keeping you standing here on a wounded leg, sir. Come in, and let our medic look at it.”

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

“You are a doctor?” the white-bearded man asked.

“Of sorts. A sort of general scientist. My name is Loudons. My friend, Mr. Altamont, here, is a scientist, also.”

There was an immediate reaction; all three of the elders of the village, and the young riflemen who had accompanied them, exchanged glances of surprise. Loudons dropped his hand to the grip of his slung auto-carbine, and Altamont sidled unobtrusively away from him, his hand moving as by accident toward the butt of his pistol. The same thought was in both men's minds, that these people might feel, as a heritage of the war of two centuries ago, a hostility to science and scientists. There was no hostility, however, in their manner as the old man advanced and held out his hand.

"I am Tenant Mycroft Jones, the Toon Leader here," he said. "This is Stamford Rawson, our Reader, and Verner Hughes, our Toon Sarge. This is his son, Murray Hughes, the Toon Sarge of the Irregulars. But come into the Aitch-Cue House, gentlemen. We have much to talk about."

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

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

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

They went through the open doorway of the old stone church, and entered the big room inside. The building had evidently been gutted by fire, two centuries before, and portions of the wall had been restored. Now there was a rough plank floor, and a plank ceiling at about twelve 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 them. The walls were decorated with trophies of weapons—a number of old M-12 rifles and M-16 submachine guns, all in good clean condition, a light machine rifle, two bazookas. Among them were stone and metal-tipped spears and crude hatchets and knives and clubs, the work of the wild men of the woods. A stairway led to the second floor, and it was up this 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 stopped with a corncob and a number of small cups. “It’s a little early in the day,” he said, “but this is a very special occasion. You smoke a pipe, I take it?” he asked Altamont. “Then try some of this; of our own growth and curing.” He extended a doeskin moccasin, which seemed to be the tobacco-container.

Altamont looked at the thing dubiously, then filled his pipe from it. The oldster drew his pistol, pushed a little wooden plug into the vent, added some tow to the priming, and, aiming at the wall, snapped it. Evidently, at times 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. He shook out the smoldering tow, blew it into flame, and lit a candle from it, offering the light to Altamont. Loudons got out a cigar and lit it from the candle; the others filled and lighted pipes. The Toon Leader reprimed his pistol, then holstered it, took off his belt and laid it aside, an example the others followed.

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

“You come, then, from the west?” the Toon Leader began by asking.

“Are you from Utah?” the gunsmith interrupted, suspiciously.

“Why, no; we’re from Arizona. A place called Fort Ridgeway,” Loudons said.

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

“We’ve been in what used to be Utah,” Altamont said. “There’s nobody there but a few Indians, and a few whites who are even less civilized.”

“You say you come from a fort? Then the wars aren’t over, yet?” Sarge Hughes asked.

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

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

“We have found only a few small groups, in the whole country, who have managed to save anything of the Old Times. Most of them lived in little villages and cultivated land. A few had horses, or cows. None, that we have ever found before, made guns and powder for themselves.

But they remembered that they were men, and did not eat one another. Whenever we find a group of people like this, we try to persuade them to let us help them.”

“Why?” the Toon Leader asked. “Why do you do this for people you’ve never met before? What do you want from them—from us—in return for your help?” He was speaking to Altamont, rather than to Loudons; it seemed obvious that he believed Altamont to be the leader and Loudons the subordinate.

“Because we’re trying to bring back the best things of the Old Times,” Altamont told him. “Look; you’ve had troubles, here. So have we, many times. Years when the crops failed; years of storms, or floods; troubles with these 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 soon, everything which makes men different from beasts will soon be no more.”

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

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

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

“We’ve thought of that; we had that problem with other groups we’ve helped,” Loudons said. “In some communities, everybody owns everything in common; we don’t have much of a problem, there. 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 who’d be concerned.”

“How is it you took so long finding us,” Alex Barrett asked. “It’s been two hundred or so years since the Wars.”

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

“That’s right,” Altamont said. “Originally, Fort Ridgeway was a military research and development center. As the country became disorganized, the Government set this project up, to develop ways of improvising power and transportation and communication methods and extracting raw materials. If they’d had a little more time, they might have saved the country. As it was, they were able to keep themselves alive and keep something like civilization going at the Fort, while the whole country was breaking apart around them. Then, when the rockets stopped falling, they started to rebuild. Fortunately, more than half the technicians at the Fort were women; there was no question of them dying out. But it’s only been in the last twenty years that we’ve been able to make nuclear-electric engines, and this is the first time any of us have gotten east of the Mississippi.”

“How did your group manage to survive?” Loudons said. “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 stupidity! Of course that was what it was. And the title, Tenant, was originally lieu-tenant; I know that, though we have all dropped the first part of the word. That should have led me, if I’d used my wits, to deduce platoon from toon.



“Yes, sir. We were originally a platoon of soldiers, two hundred years ago, at the time when the Wars ended. The Old Toon, and the First Tenant, were guarding pows, whatever they were. The pows were all killed by a big bomb, and the First Tenant, Lieutenant Gilbert Dunbar, took his ... his platoon and started to march to Deecee, where the Government was, but there was no Government, any more. They fought with the 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 whom 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 any longer, it was obvious that there could be no crime. The First Ten—Lieutenant—kept his men together, because he had The Books. Each evening, at the end of each day’s march, he read to his men out of them.

“Finally, they came here. There had been a town here, but it had been burned and destroyed, and there were people camping in the ruins. Some of them fought and were killed; others came in and joined the platoon. At first, they built shelters around this building, and made this their fort. Then they cleared away the ruins, and built new houses. When the cartridges for the rifles began

to get scarce, they began to make gunpowder, and new rifles, like these we are using now, to shoot without cartridges. Lieutenant Dunbar did this out of his own knowledge, because there is nothing in The Books about making gunpowder; the guns in The Books are rifles and shotguns and revolvers and air-guns; except for the air-guns, which we haven't been able to make, these all shot cartridges. As with your people, 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 it for more houses, and we've been clearing a little more land for fields each year. We still read and follow the teachings of The Books; we have made laws for ourselves out of them.”

“And we are waiting here, for the Slain and Risen One,” Tenant Jones added, looking at Altamont intently. “It is impossible that He will not, sooner or later, deduce the existence of this community. If He has not done so already.”

“Well, sir,” the Toon Leader changed the subject abruptly, “enough of this talk about the past. If I understand rightly, it is the future in which you gentlemen are interested.” He pushed back the cuff of his hunting shirt and looked at an old and worn wrist watch. “Eleven-hundred; we'll have lunch shortly. This afternoon, you will meet the other people of the Toon, and this evening, at eighteen-hundred, we'll have a mess together outdoors. Then, when we have everybody together, we can talk over your offer to help us, and decide what it is that you can give us that we can use.”

“You spoke, a while ago, of what you could do for us, in return,” Altamont said. “There's one thing you can do, no further away than tomorrow, if you're willing.”

“And that is—?”

“In Pittsburgh, somewhere, there is an underground crypt, full of books. Not bound and printed books; spools of microfilm. You know what that is?”

The others shook their heads. Altamont continued:

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

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

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

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

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

“Not a map; just some information. But we can work out the location of the crypt.”

“A ritual,” Stamford Rawson said happily. “Of course.”



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

In the afternoon, he and Loudons separated. The latter attached himself to the Tenant, the Reader, and an old woman, Irene Klein, who was almost a hundred years old and was the repository and arbiter of most of the community’s oral legends. Altamont, on the other hand, started, with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, and Mordecai Ricci, the miller, to inspect the gunshop and grist mill. Joined by half a dozen more of the village craftsmen, they visited the forge and foundry, the sawmill, the wagon shop. Altamont 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. Then, loading his guides into the helicopter, they took off for a visit to the powder mill on the island and a trip up the river.

They 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 disastrous seemed to be happening, exhilaration took the place of fear, and by the time they set down on the tip of the island, the eight men were confirmed aviation enthusiasts. The trip up-river was an even bigger

success; the high point came when Altamont set his controls for Hover, pointed out a snarl of driftwood in the stream, and allowed his passengers to fire one of the machine guns at it. The lead balls of their own black-powder rifles would have plunked into the waterlogged 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.



“Monty, I don’t know what the devil to make of this crowd,” Loudons said, that evening, after the feast, when they had entered the helicopter and prepared to retire. “We’ve run into some weird communities—that lot down in Old Mexico who live in the church and claim they have a divine mission to redeem the world by prayer, fasting and flagellation, or those yogis in Los Angeles—”

“Or the Blackout Boys in Detroit,” Altamont added.

“That’s understandable,” Loudons said, “after what their ancestors went through in the Last War. But this crowd, here! The descendants of an old United States Army infantry platoon, with a fully developed religion centered on a slain and resurrected god—Normally, it would take thousands of years for a slain-god religion to develop, and then only from the field-fertility magic of primitive agriculturists. Well, you saw these people’s fields from the air. Some of the members of that old platoon were men who knew the latest methods of scientific farming; they didn’t need naive fairy tales about the planting and germination of seed.”

“Sure this religion isn’t just a variant of Christianity?”

“Absolutely not. In the first place, these Sacred Books can’t be the Bible—you heard Tenant Jones say that they mentioned firearms that used cartridges. That means that they can’t be older than 1860 at the very earliest. And in the second place, this slain god wasn’t crucified or put to death by any form of execution; he perished, together with his enemy, in combat, and both god and devil were later resurrected. The Enemy is supposed to be the master mind back of these cannibal savages in the woods and also in the ruins.”

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

Loudons shook his head disgustedly. “Every time I brought up the question, they evaded. 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 Toon, by the way—and then he sent him out on some other errand, undoubtedly to pass the word not to talk to us about their religion.”

“I don’t get that,” Altamont said. “They showed me everything they had—their gunshop, their powder mill, their defenses, everything.” He smoked in silence for a moment. “Say, this slain god couldn’t be the original platoon commander, could he?”

“No. They have the greatest respect for his memory—decorate his grave regularly, drink toasts to him—but he hasn’t been deified. They got the idea for this deity of theirs out of the Sacred Books.” Loudons gnawed the end of his cigar and frowned. “Monty, this has me worried like the devil, because I believe that they suspect that you are the Slain and Risen One.”

“Could be, at that. I know the Tenant came up to me, very respectfully, and said, ‘I hope you don’t think, sir, that I was presumptuous in trying to display my humble deductive abilities to you.’”

“What did you say?” Loudons demanded rather sharply.

“Told him certainly not; that he’d used a good quick method of demonstrating that he and his people weren’t like those mindless subhumans in the woods.”

“That was all right. I don’t know how we’re going to handle this. They only suspect that you are their deity. As it stands, now, we’re on trial, here. And I get the impression that logic, not faith, seems to be their supreme religious virtue; that skepticism is a religious obligation instead of a sin. That’s something else that’s practically unheard of. I wish I knew—”



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

“Pass the tantalus, Murray,” the Tenant said, and the youngest of the four handed the corncob-corked bottle to the eldest. Tenant Jones filled his cup, and then sat staring at it, while Verner

Hughes thrust his pipe into the toe of the moccasin and filled it. Finally, he drank about half of the clear wild-plum brandy.

“Gentlemen, I am baffled,” he confessed. “We have three alternate possibilities here, and we dare not disregard any of them. Either this man who calls himself Altamont is truly He, or he is merely what we are asked to believe, one of a community 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. There are three possibilities, too, none of which can be eliminated. But what was your third possibility, Tenant?”

“That they are creatures of the Enemy. Perhaps that one or the other of them is the Enemy.”

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

“The Enemy—with such weapons and resources!” Murray Hughes gasped. Then he emptied his cup and refilled it. “No! I can’t believe that; he’d 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 his hellish organization.”

“It is a possibility,” Reader Rawson admitted. “One which we can neither accept nor 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—”

“If it is really He,” Murray said, “I think we are on trial.”

“What do you mean, son? Oh, I see. Of course, I don’t believe he is, but that’s mere doubt, not negative certainty. But if I’m wrong, if this man is truly He, we are being tested. He has come among us incognito; if 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 that we can do tonight. But tomorrow, we have promised to help our visitors, whoever they may be, in searching for this crypt in the city. Murray, you were to be in charge of the detail that was to accompany them. Carry on as arranged, and say nothing of our suspicions, but advise your men to keep a sharp watch on the strangers, that they may learn all they can from them. Stamford, you and Verner and I will go along. We should, if we have any wits at all, observe something.”



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

Loudons looked over his shoulder at the photostated magazine page.

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

“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?” He checked back in the astronomical handbook, and the photostated pages of the old almanac, and looked over his calculations. “All right, here’s the angle of the shadow, and the compass-bearing. I had a look, yesterday, when I was taking the local citizenry on that junket. The old baseball diamond at Forbes Field is plainly visible, and I located the ruins of the Cathedral of Learning from that. Here’s the above-sea-level altitude of the top of the tower. After you’ve landed us, go up to this altitude—use the barometric altimeter, not the radar—and hold position.”

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

“Rifle’s pointing downward at the correct angle now?” he asked. “Good. Then all I have to do is hold the helicopter steady, keep it at the right altitude, level, and pointed in the right direction, and watch through the sight while you move the flag around, and direct you by radio. Why wasn’t I born quintuplets?”

“Mr. Altamont! Dr. Loudons!” a voice outside the helicopter called. “Are you ready for us, now?”

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

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

“Very pleased, Tenant, gentlemen. I met all you young men last evening; I remember you,” Altamont said. “Now, if you’ll all 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 location and height of this building. Dr. Loudons will hold this helicopter at exactly the position of the top of the building, and aim through the sights of the rifle, there. One of you will have this flag in his hand, and will move it back and forth; Dr. Loudons will tell us when the flag is in the sight of the rifle.”

“He’ll need a good pair of lungs to do that,” Verner Hughes commented.

“We’ll use radio. A portable set on the ground, and the helicopter’s radio set.” He was met, to his surprise, 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 he explained. “You can talk directly; how much better than just sending a telegram!”

“But, finding the crypt by the shadow; that’s exactly like the—” Murray Hughes began, then stopped short. Immediately, he began talking loudly 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 on which the shadow of the old Cathedral of Learning had fallen proved easier than either Altamont or Loudons had expected. The towering building was now a tumbled mass of slagged rubble, but it was quite possible to determine its original center, and with the old data from the excellent reference library at Fort Ridgeway, its height above sea level was known. After a little jockeying, the helicopter came to a hovering stop, and the slanting barrel of the rifle in the vise pointed downward along the line of the shadow that had been cast on that afternoon in June, 1993, the cross hairs of the scope-sight centered almost exactly on the spot Altamont had estimated on the map. While he peered through the sight, Loudons brought the helicopter slanting down to land on the sheet of fused glass that had once been a grassy campus.

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



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

“If you’ll pardon me, sir,” the Tenant said to Altamont, “I think it would be a good idea if your companion went up in the flying machine and circled around over us, to keep watch for 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,” Altamont said. “From the looks of this, we’ll need everybody 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, and then spray it with bullets, and find out what it is afterward.”

They waited until the helicopter had climbed to position and was circling above, and then turned their attention to the place where the sheet of fused earth and stone bulged upward. It must have been almost ground-zero of one of the hydrogen-bombs; the wreckage of the Cathedral of Learning had fallen predominantly to the north, and the Carnegie Library was tumbled to the east.

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

He used the solenoid-hammer, slowly pounding a hole into 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 deep, revealing concrete bonded with crushed steel-mill slag.

“We missed the door,” he said. “That means we’ll have to tunnel in through who knows how much concrete. Well—”

He used a second and larger charge, after digging a hole a foot deep. When he and his helpers came up to look, they found a large mass of concrete blown out, and solid steel behind it. Altamont cut two more holes sidewise, one on either side of the blown-out place, and fired a charge in each of them, bringing down more concrete. He found that 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. With the others crowding behind him, Altamont stood in the doorway and inspected the interior with his flashlight; he heard somebody back of him say something about a most peculiar sort of a dark-lantern. Across the small room, on the opposite wall, was a bronze plaque.

It carried quite a lengthy inscription, including the names of all the persons and institutions participating in the microfilm project. The History Department at the Fort would be most interested in that, but the only thing that interested Altamont was the statement that the floor had been laid over the trapdoor leading to the vaults where the microfilms were stored. He went outside to the radio.

“Hello, Jim. We’re inside, but the films are stored in an underground vault, and we have to tear up a concrete floor,” he said. “Go back to the village and gather up all the men you can carry, and tools. Hammers and picks and short steel bars. I don’t want to use explosives inside. The interior of the crypt oughtn’t to be damaged, and I don’t know what a blast in here might do to the film, and I don’t want to take chances.”

“No, of course not. How thick do you think this floor is?”

“Haven’t the least idea. Plenty thick, I’d say. Those films would have to be well buried, to shield them from radioactivity. We can expect that it’ll take some time.”

“All right. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

The helicopter turned and went wind-milling away, over what had been the Golden Triangle, down the Ohio.

Altamont went back to the little concrete bunker and sat down, lighting his pipe. Murray Hughes and his four riflemen spread out, one circling around the glazed butte that had been the Cathedral of Learning, another climbing to the top of the old library, and the others taking positions to the south and east.

Altamont sat in silence, smoking his pipe and trying to form some conception of the wealth under that concrete floor. It was no use. Jim Loudons probably understood a little more nearly what those books would mean to the world of today, and what they could do toward shaping the world of the future. There was a library at Fort Ridgeway, and it was an excellent one—for its purpose. In 1996, when the rockets had come crashing down, it had contained the cream of the world’s technological knowledge—and very little else. There was a little fiction, a few books of ideas, just enough to give the survivors a tantalizing glimpse of the world of their fathers. But now—

A rifle banged to the south and east, and banged again. Either Murray Hughes or Birdy Edwards—it was one of the two hunting rifles from the helicopter. On the heels of the reports, they heard a voice shouting: “Scowrsers! A lot of them, coming from up the river!” A moment

later, there was a light whip-crack of one of the long muzzle-loaders, from the top of the old Carnegie Library, and Altamont could see a wisp of gray-white smoke drifting away from where it had been fired. He jumped to his feet and raced for the radio, picking it up and bringing 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 in!" The boy on top of the library began scrambling down. Another came running from the direction of the half-demolished Cathedral of Learning, a third from the baseball field that had served as Altamont's point of reference the afternoon before. The fourth, Murray Hughes, was running in from the ruins of the old Carnegie Tech buildings, and Birdy Edwards sped up the main road from Shenley Park. Once or twice, as he ran, Murray Hughes paused, turned, and fired behind him.

Then his pursuers came into sight. They ran erect, and they wore a few rags of skin garments, and they carried spears and hatchets and clubs, so they were probably classifiable as men. Their hair was long and unkempt; their bodies were almost black with dirt and from the sun. A few of them were yelling; 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 his rifle to the ground, poured a charge of powder, patched a ball and rammed it home, replaced the ramrod. Tenant Jones fired then, and then Birdy Edwards joined them and began shooting with the telescope-sighted hunting rifle. The young man who had been north of the Cathedral of Learning had one of the auto-carbines; Altamont had providently set the fire-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. And Altamont, sitting down and propping his elbows on his knees, took both hands to the automatic which was his only weapon, emptying the magazine and replacing it. The last three of the savages he shot in the back; they had had enough and were running for their lives.

So far, everybody was safe. The boy in the library came down through a place where the wall had fallen. Murray Hughes stopped running and came slowly toward the bunker, putting a fresh clip into his rifle. The others came drifting in.

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

Silence.

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

“Maybe there’s a reason, Birdy,” Tenant Jones said. “The Enemy is after big game, this time.”

“Jim! Where the devil are you?” Altamont fairly yelled into the radio, and as he did, he knew the answer. Loudons was in the village, away from the helicopter, gathering tools and workers. Nothing to do but keep on trying.

“Here they come!” Reader Rawson warned.

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

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

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

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

“Jim!” Altamont was almost praying into the radio. “Come in, Jim!”

“What is it, Monty? I was outside.”

Altamont told him.

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

“Take a chance on it; it won’t cost you anything but my life, and that’s not worth much at present.”

“All right; hold on. We’ll be along in a few minutes.”

“Loudons is bringing the helicopter,” he told the others. “All we have to do is hold on, here, till he comes.”

A naked savage raised his head from behind what might, two hundred years ago, have been a cement park-bench, a hundred yards away. Reader Stamford 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 had 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 have eliminated the third of your possibilities, Tenant. And I think probably the second, as well.”

Altamont wondered what they were double-talking about. There wasn’t any particular mystery about the mass attack of the wild men to him. Debased as they were, they still possessed speech and the ability to transmit experiences. No matter how beclouded in superstition, they still remembered that aircraft dropped bombs, and bombs killed people, and where people had been killed, they would find fresh meat. They had seen the helicopter circling about, and had heard the blasting; everyone in the area had been drawn to the scene as soon as Loudons had gone down the river.

Maybe they had forgotten that aircraft also carried guns. At least, when they sprang to their feet and started to run at the return of the helicopter, many did not run far.



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

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

“I can’t wait till we’re in radio-range of the Fort, to report this, Jim,” he said. “Of all the wonderful luck! And I don’t yet know which is 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—”

“I’m not very happy about it, Monty,” Loudons confessed. “I keep thinking about what’s going to happen to them.”

“Why, nothing’s going to happen to them. They’re going to be given the means of producing more food, keeping more of them alive, having more leisure to develop themselves in—”

“Monty; I saw the Sacred Books.”

“The deuce! What were they?”

“It. One volume; a collection of works. We have it at the Fort; I’ve read it. How I ever missed all the clues—You see Monty, what I’m worried about is what’s going to happen to those people when they find out that we’re not really Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.”

An Irregular Bibliography of the Science-Fictional Holmes

Lord it over your friends!

Sherlockian libraries are common: one reader's house in twenty, I've found, will have at least the beginning of a Sherlockian bookshelf. On these shelves you're sure to find the basic baker's (street) half-dozen: a sturdy hardback collection of the canon (usually someone's "first" collection), Baring-Gould's three essential volumes, Meyer's first pastiche (regardless of the owner's opinion), and a collection of latter-day short stories. The canon will be tumble-down, with some pages creased (despite best efforts), and some lines too excellent to do anything but be underlined; the following books, if not second hand, are in much better condition and much less thumbed.

This is all very well; this is all very essential; but something must be done if friends are to be impressed and your library is to be the subject of envy.

I humbly suggest investing in the science-fictional Holmes. The books are not so expensive as to send you to the poor-house, as many of the foundational texts of *The Game* will, and mark you as a man or woman driven to fulfill your set. Take note that many of the books were first published, in whole or in part, in magazines. I have not noted these. This bibliography is focused on what would look the best on a standard bookshelf and, moreover, are somewhat easily obtained.

But, how do you find these books?

How do you know if they're worth reading, once you've collected them?

Settle back, dear reader, and settle deeper in. The time has come to discuss these works, and allow you to fill out your library.

The Bibliography

"The Footprints on the Ceiling"

***Rather Like...*, by Jules Castier (1920)**

***The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Ellery Queen (1944)**

The very first science-fictional Sherlock Holmes story and, unfortunately, it's not very good. Castier writes in a nearly perfect approximation of the style Doyle used in *The Lost World*, with

Malone once again shouldered forth as narrator, but his understanding of all the characters—from Malone to Roxton to Challenger to Mrs. Challenger to Watson to Sherlock Holmes himself—is so seriously flawed that it is the forgiving Sherlockian indeed who can make it through the story without groaning and gnashing his teeth. Holmes is presented as an emotionless robot. His only reaction is a cold disinterest, without the manic sparks or barks of laughter or gleaming eyes. The story itself is no great shakes, either, alas: Challenger, while experimenting with the color spectrum, goes missing and footprints are seen to trail up the wall. Holmes reverses the process to bring Challenger back from limbo. And, thus, the story ends.

If read in *Rather Like*. . . the story is surrounded with much better imitations of famous authors; if read in *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the story is surrounded with far, far better pastiches and parodies. Wherever it may be found, however, the story is still a disappointment.

As both books tend to go for quite a fair amount of money, it may be better to err on the side of obsession and purchase *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Unless you're a wide-range obsessive of pre-war literature (as I am), there's little enough to see there.

Fascinatingly, Castier wrote this (as well as the rest of *Rather Like*. . .) while held in a WW1 German POW camp. His sole privilege was access to the library, and to fill his time he wrote elaborate pastiches in the style of the authors. He did this extremely well. To some extent, it still surprises me that *Rather Like*. . . was not an elaborate hoax with the pastiches and burlesques penned by the authors themselves.

The Science-Fictional Sherlock Holmes, edited by the Council of Four (1960)

One of those books which are too rare to buy for anything less than the price of your arm, your leg, and your heart. Most—though, sadly, not all—of the stories included in this collection would later appear in *Sherlock Holmes Through Time and Space*. An expanded version of *The Return* appeared in this collection as well, though I prefer the shorter magazine edition.

The cover is, truthfully, a bit ornery and a touch too far ironic.

The Other Log of Phileas Fogg, by Philip José Farmer (1973)

Holmes does not appear, neither directly nor indirectly. Even so, we're faced with a novel where Professor Moriarty (and his brothers) takes a starring role and the Diogenes Club stars in a

very minor supporting role. The science fiction is a fascinating blend of Jules Verne realism (fitting a novel that takes place during *Around the World in 80 Days*), and then-modern science fantasy. Well worth reading.

Covers vary wildly, but I recommend the Tor edition and the Titan edition for the discerning cover admirer.

***Sherlock Holmes' War of the Worlds*, by Wade Wellman and Manly Wade Wellman (1975)**

A preemptive reading of Dennis E. Power's "The Kissable Mrs. Hudson" may help (some) Sherlockians read through this book without tossing it at the wall or throwing it down and stamping upon it. But, once the reader descends into the novel (prepared or not), they will find an effective and often charming novel that fills in the majority of H.G. Wells' plot holes, ties up the majority of his loose ends, and presents a far more interesting account of the Martian war. Only beware the willing lips of the landlady. . .

The cover is simple and so much a product of its times (egad, that shade of green!) that you are best off presenting the spine and only the spine to your guests.

***Exit Sherlock Holmes*, by Robert Lee Hall (1977)**

A fascinating take on Holmes' death and resurrection, which, alas, cannot be discussed without spoiling all sense out of the novel.

The cover, depending on the edition, is either simple and striking or overdone. Choose wisely.

***Time for Sherlock Holmes*, by David Dvorkin (1983)**

A time travel novel, with a twist. The novel has a unique take on it, given the normal restrictions of the genre, and is especially interesting when read in concert with *All-Consuming Fire*.

The cover should impress upon your friends that this is, in fact, a *science fictional* Sherlock Holmes library.

***Sherlock Holmes Through Time and Space*, edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles Waugh (1984)**

A nearly classic collection. Nearly every author is a world-recognized great, nearly every story is a polished gem among those authors' crown jewels, and nearly every word in the collection is well-written and every story well-told. A handful of gag stories weaken the effect, but the rest presents a front so strong that it cannot be resisted. This collection is especially notable for Mack Reynolds' "The Adventure of the Extraterrestrial," Isaac Asimov's "The Ultimate Crime," and two of Philip José Farmer's very best canonical short stories. It's simply wonderful to settle in with this volume and read; each one is different enough that the dull drag of monotony never sets in, and the collection may be safely read in a single glorious drag.

If the editors had been a touch more comprehensive in mining the table of contents from *The Science-Fictional Sherlock Holmes*, this first-rate must-read collection could have been as nearly as essential to any Holmesian library as Baring-Gould or Meyers.

The cover is among the greatest covers to ever grace a Sherlock Holmes novel, and to leave this book facing front will no doubt stun your fawning friends.

***All-Consuming Fire*, by Andy Lane (1994)**

A stunning novel. Tie-in novels are often horrible, and just as often unreadable. The *Doctor Who* range rises about this, regularly, but even as the *Doctor Who* range rises above the standard tie-in mediocrity *All-Consuming Fire* rises above the *Doctor Who* novels. Told in a nearly perfect imitation of the style Doyle employed in his better stories, Sherlock Holmes and the seventh Doctor are set on the same case. It has all the delights of the canon locked well in place and is, effortlessly, one of the best Sherlock Holmes pastiches yet written. The only failing is that the final third is rather off. Not bad, just *off*. Even so, the novel is invaluable reading, and well worth the inflated price it commands.

The cover is delightful.

***Sherlock Holmes in Orbit*, edited by Mike Resnick and Martin H. Greenberg (1995)**

Not only one of the finest collections of its kind, but altogether one of the finest post-Doyle Sherlock Holmes collections yet produced. I read this collection many years ago, and several of stories stick as strongly in my mind as they did a decade or more ago: "The Adventure of the Field Theorems" by Vonda N. McIntyre (which pits Sherlock Holmes against Conan Doyle over the authenticity of crop circles), "The Case of the Purloined L'isitek" by Josepha Sherman (a

somewhat Hoka-like story where a race of horse-like aliens models itself on Sherlock Holmes), "The Adventure of the Russian Grave" by William Barton and Michael Capobianco (one of the finest pastiches to feature Professor Moriarty, and all the finer for keeping him distinctly off stage), and "The Case of the Detective's Smile" by Mark Bourne (which is not only a fine Sherlockian pastiche, but one of the greatest sequels to Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books). All of these stories are excellent, and hold up remarkably. If you were to buy only one of the collections featured in this bibliography, this would be the one to purchase.

The cover is 1990s sci-fi run wild. I leave it to the reader to decide if that's a *very* good thing, a *very* bad thing, or a *terrifying* thing.

***Doctor Who: Happy Endings*, by various authors (1996)**

From the fabulous *All-Consuming Fire* comes the sequel of a sort, *Happy Endings*, a novel wherein all the authors from all the preceding books in this *Doctor Who* novel were called back to contribute a single chapter. Andy Lane chose to focus on Holmes and Watson and their invitation to Bernice Summerfield's wedding.

***Here, There, & Everywhere*, by Chris Robeson (2005)**

A volume which takes us (even further) outside the realm of the strictly canonical. Sherlock Holmes is replaced with Sandford Blank, a free-form mélange of Holmes and that pretender Blake, his Watson a time traveling young woman on the search for adventure. While a time traveling narrator is certainly a new twist on the Holmesian milieu, what sells this story is the case itself: Wells' time traveler, once again, at the center of a missing persons case. What powers his time machine, notably, is powder prepared from a certain meteorite which fell in Horsell Common. . .

Moreover, the one, true Sherlock Holmes' existence in alternate timelines is discussed at length.

While the directly Holmesian content is slight, it's certainly an enjoyable romp and the psychedelic cover-art will lend a womanly touch to your bookshelf.

***Erasing Sherlock* (sometimes *Faction Paradox: Erasing Sherlock*) by Kelly Hale (2006)**

A stand-alone novel which was adopted as part of the *Faction Paradox* line before once more becoming a stand-alone novel. Though controversial (especially for its take on Sherlock Holmes and his family), the novel itself is a delight and well worth reading.

If you *can* track down a physical copy, the cover is excellent.

Farmerphile #12, fanzine (2008)

Philip José Farmer revisits Sherlock Holmes one last time. Though this is, ultimately, a slim volume dedicated to one of the greatest science fiction author's Holmesian obsession, there is so little direct sci-fi content that, had the author been anyone else, it would not have made the list (enjoyable as it may be).

The cover, featuring Farmer as Holmes, is impressive.

The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, edited by John Joseph Adams (2009)

This is a nearly excellent collection. Most of the stories are fabulous (though reprinted), and this is a fine collection to pick up for a one-stop overview of modern Sherlock Holmes pastiches. Many of the modern classics, are well represented, either in singular stories (Neil Gaiman's "A Study in Emerald") or in authors who have done well with the form (Anne Perry, for instance). I also particularly enjoyed rereading one of my favorite stories from Sherlock Holmes in Orbit, "The Adventure of the Field Theorems."

Unfortunately...

Many of the stories are not science fiction, nor even fantasy, but regular old Holmes stories called forth for another round.

The book, further, loses respect through the editor's ignorance. In one case, he insinuates Lewis Carroll was a pedophile, and Alice Liddell his target. This is a lie long since put to rest; but like all lies, has a certain shady appeal to the weak-minded. No matter how often figures such as Karoline Leach, Jenny Woolf, and Jenna Marie West put such lies, in all their multifarious notions, to rest, there will always be a new ignorant ready to stand up and repeat what he has heard through a game of telephone. To further the editor's showy ignorance, he believes the oft-repeated nonsense that Joseph Bell was brought in by Scotland Yard to solve the Ripper case. Bell was not called in by Scotland Yard. He did not step foot in Whitechapel. He submitted his

theory to Sir Henry Littlejohn, who, in turn, had been contacted by Scotland Yard. Bell himself, however, had no direct relation to the Ripper case.

It's exhausting to read so much lies and misinformation, and troubling to think that people may be lured into believing the editor.

To return to the stories themselves: this is a fine overview of modern pastiche, though I'd recommend seeking out the volumes where the stories originated for a higher quality of reading experience.

The cover is of ordinary quality, and it certainly holds interest in a spine-beheld profile. It's endlessly stunning that the publisher got away with this cover without Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law's approval.

***Miss Wildthyme and Friends Investigate*, edited by Obverse Books (2010)**

Iris Wildthyme, renegade Time Lady, and her companion Panda, a toy panda, drink booze and solve mysteries around the cosmos. Sherlock Holmes and his various family members, friends, enemies, and cousins (to believe Baring-Gould) all come within her orbit throughout the stories of this collection. If read in concert with *All-Consuming Fire*, it's striking to see how the concept of Holmes teamed up with a Time Lord could have turned out if it were taken far, far less seriously.

The cover bears much in common with the hoary old Pyramid paperbacks. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing depends on your sense of style.

***Tales of the Great Detectives*, edited by Obverse Books (2014)**

This is, in effect, a spin-off of a spin-off of a spin-off (or, depending on who you ask, a spin-off of a spin-off of a spin-off of a spin-off), but carries itself remarkably well regardless. Each of the stories shows a great love for the character and an overwhelming willingness to mix and match elements from the decades upon decades of stories (such as one case where the canonical Watson is forced to work with the Nigel Bruce Watson).

The cover certainly sells the idea of multiple science-fictional Holmeses.

***The Return*, by H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire, edited by James Bojaciuk (2014)**

You already own this volume. I applaud your good taste.

MORE READING AWAITS

Though you've come to the end of this book, don't imagine the reading needs to end here. Robert E. Wronski Jr's website, [The Television Crossover Universe](#), contains hundreds more pages of crossovers and in-depth explorations of fictional words.

If something horrifying is more your taste, please check out [Those Who Live Long Forgotten](#) (whose stories are profiled in this very volume), [Sleep Still, Chanel Horse](#), a novel of terror from Ro McNulty, and The Horror Crossover Encyclopedia, a reference work of the strange and abominable by Robert Wronski Jr.

On the following pages, you'll find an exclusive preview of James Bojaciuk's story from Those Who Live Long Forgotten, "Imprisoned, Half-Dead a Syllogism," which is itself another tale of Sherlock Holmes.

THOSE WHO LIVE LONG FORGOTTEN

IMPRISONED HALF DEAD A SYLLOGISM

JAMES BOJACIUK

“It’s simple.” *He has a stomach worm.*

“Just tell us.” *His vision is poor.*

“One sentence. That’s all. One sentence and the door is open.” *He no longer loves his wife.*

A pause.

“Who murdered Jack the Ripper?”

I answer with the imprisoned’s only weapon: silence.

“To hell with you.”

The window slams away and darkness imposes. I stand, as I must, and count the paces from door to highset window. I abhor boredom. Six feet, three inches, padded all around. White, asylum padding. Below that, heavy concrete. Ten feet above, just beyond my fingertips, is a welded gate. The metal is rough, but set tight.

Thus you are acquainted with my digs.

A click.

A grunt from a bent-over man.

A tray is shoved through the skirt of my door.

I approach, softly, and inspect my dinner. Potatoes—I sniff—and they’re only reasonably expired. They have supplied me with potatoes for the sixth time in as many days, which further supports the hypothesis they have buried me in Ireland. Sea breeze, the constant break of surf, and the peculiar blue-green grass all but confirms the hypothesis.

There are benefits when captors allow nails to grow long. I stab my nail into the floor’s padding, catching up an invisible edge. What greets me is a swilling mass, rot and stench just beginning to collect.

My potatoes join the collection and I watch as a second stain spreads.

A new interrogator. He follows the script in every respect, though he exchanges words for near synonyms and sentences for his own retellings. He possesses a poor memory. I settle against the metal door and steeple my fingers before my face: focus consumes me, and my cell passes away.

The script begins again: he is not so much in command of his memory as to find his own words again, and stumbles through yet another retelling.

“It’s easy.” Voice rough, his letters proceed unlimbered. Words are not his trade.

“Tell me.” The “us” is exchanged for “me”; either this man is the ringleader (unlikely: he smells like dirt, even this thick door cannot conceal that), or he lays so low in the chain of command that he hopes extolling information shall advance him. Probability lies with the latter.

“One name. That’s it, nice and easy, and I get to unlock the door.”

That he is obsessed with himself becomes crystalline.

“Who stabbed Jack the Ripper?”

He disguises it well, but one detects the Irish-E creep upon his vowels. This does not argue for Ireland, though it tells me the organization behind my imprisonment is essentially English in nature. He finds advancement in burying his ancestry. A foreign society would not mind; an English society would not choose someone whose race is nominally seditious. His words are carefully plucked from the throat; the subduing is not natural.

The script begins again.

But, without sight, there is precious little data.

Scraps collect like data.

My floor is naught but stains: some remain wet (yesterday’s beef stew—more broth than bovine), while others dry slowly, momentarily stalled from leeching up the walls. The smell, almost comfortingly, has grown unbearable. My mind only truly functions in disarray.

The skirt of my door slips open.

A man—the same man as always—bends over and grunts that particular from-the-gut grunt.

And now things change.

He sniffs.

He sniffs heavily.

My swill assaults him and he draws back, cussing.

“What the hell? Josiah, Moriarty, get the damn well over here!”

I am familiar with a form of Japanese wrestling that has bought me my life on no less than six separate occasions—and, though I was happy as a hermit, it brought me no less than three students, all insufferable in their own ways. Alas, I was a younger man. Now, I cross my legs and sit, observant, against the back corner of my cell. My swill soaks down the wall, through the back of my shirt.

They confabulate beyond the door; words are lost for sound, but the sentiment remains.

The man who brought me my dinner, evidently, was my first interrogator.

The man haunted by a bad memory is subservient to the other men.

The third man is new to me. He has no trace of familiarity, though his accent indicates an Oxford education.

The words cease, as they must. A key grinds through the lock (recently rusted; perhaps we are nearer the sea than deduced), and light greets me. In my glory days, I had carefully cultivated the ability to see in the dark—a proper application of chemicals, a proper submission to the shadows, and I could pass from darkness to light without loss of vision. Even then, with what chemicals could remain in the eye after 30 years, I was not prepared for a hall of fluorescent lights.

My captors were lost in the blur. Three shadows, irreducible, snatched me up and dragged me on knees from cell to concrete.

Sensation filled the gap left by my eyes.

New concrete, still retaining some slight puttness due to the damp atmosphere. This installation could not be more than six months old, not much older than my own imprisonment.

“Hell. What the hell did he do there?”

“Didn’t eat a — thing. Stuffed it all...oh God, in the floor, and. . .walls.”

I draw to my knees, blinking against the glare. Another door settled into the wall two feet from mine—exactly as stout, exact in composition, save that some kind soul had set a window in it. I draw upright, as the three inspected my room. They edged deeper in.

“I bet he got it in the ceiling too.”

A dead end lingers behind me: a full-stop rounded off in concrete; a bare wall of the same construction carries on to my right, until it takes a hard right into the connecting room. To the

left is my cell. The adjoining cell looks down the turn, into the connecting room. My path was clear.

I take a step.

I already knew they turned; I already knew they approached. The sounds indicated pursuit, but the smells of my room clung to them, making sound moot beside olfactory evidence.

A boot crunches my knee, bringing me down to the concrete. The boot continues to grind. Judging by height (deduced via the relative distance between his mouth and my ear), he is my latest interrogator. A glance over my shoulder confirms the hypothesis.

Fingertips applied to the proper pressure points, however, swiftly removed his boot.

Forgive me. My Boswell had a talent for romance. I am merely a scientist.

The boot, regardless, *was* removed. I followed that pyrrhic victory with a thrusting palm. The bone of my palm struck his groin, which sent him crashing his own way to the ground. I scabbled for footing, but my left leg refused my commands.

One broken old man on the ground cannot defend himself from two (comparatively) young attackers.

My left arm lay useless, perhaps with a broken bone. My eyes were swollen, presumably blackened. They struck carefully—perhaps, however loath I am to use the term, *scientifically*—to wound in such ways that would affect morale more than health. They tied me, left me in a chair, and attended to business.

Said business consisted of laughing at their companion.

Said business further consisted of hauling him afoot, slapping him on the back, and attending to the second door.

The Oxford man slaps him on the back a little too hard. “Never have a monkey fight a man.” His eyes smile; the Irishman’s don’t.

“Think they been talkin’?” A palm to the groin, it would seem, relieved the Irishman of his faux accent.

“That’s a Show Up! No, Moriarty,” replied the Oxford man. My spine stiffened. “What the hell are they gonna do, whistle Morse code?”

“Yes, but where are we putting him? That room’s unlivable.” My chef has a tendency to hold his hands, folded, over his groin. A sure sign of servility. Which leads, naturally, to the obvious

question: does the Oxford man select the weak and the frightened to serve him (a superiority complex) or do my prisoners have a tendency to hire these men (showing themselves to have a feeling of false omnipotence).

“We can put him in Livingston’s room. You mucks find a problem every moment.”

“Yeah,” Moriarty pulled himself upright. His face contracted. “But Livingston’s there.”

The Oxford man sacrificed a high-born sigh. “*Remove* Livingston.”

“Into *that* hellhole? I guess if I scrub it. . .”

“No. Remove. Does that word have too many letters? Here’s four more. K-I-L-L.” He pressed his hands against his temples. “Now you have dragged me to your level.” He paused. His mind is not a dictionary, but a storehouse for immodest words. It seems he takes down the largest word he can find, dusts it off, double checks the meaning, and tosses it out as if it were a hand grenade. His storehouse fails him. What comes from his mouth, next, is a simple array of sentences any farmer’s son would know: “Take him to the other edge. He can fertilize your potatoes.”

Edge would indicate a raised elevation. Perhaps a plateau, perhaps a cliff, perhaps an encircling crag (though the last option is distinctly unlikely).

My mind is too active. My deductions threaten to be spurious.

Moriarty raises his hand. His right ring finger is missing; clearly cut off. The wound angles downward from left to right in a gentle slope. The wound angle—as though wrought by a stooping man—indicates that his attacker was elderly. Other variations are impossible. A child’s cut would be upward, thus angling the cut from right to left; a tall man’s cut would be from left to right, yes, but at a far more severe an angle. Therefore, his attacker was an elderly man. The wound is roughly a year old.

Far too many thoughts.

Moriarty nods. Three nods, quick and exaggerated.

Rough hands meet key meet lock. All is done swiftly, before his mind can catch up with his body.

A voice from inside: “What’s this?”

Not a word. Moriarty grabs him—this much is evident from the slight scrape of a shoe on stone and the clatter of something fallen (likely a chair)—and drags him, by his collar, out into the hallways and out into the room.

“I told you where Ogilvy’s papers are! I *told* you!”

Moriarty's fists served better against Livingston's face.

Gristle cracked underfoot.

My potatoes taste like gristle.

Chains are no more a prison for the pure reasoner than a cell, yet I am still shackled to this table. I dip my spoon into the gruel. The potato field is beyond my cell's window. I watched Moriarty bury my prison-mate. He had a scar on his back. A knife stabbed deep approximately one year before. The wound angled sharply toward his spine. Such an angle would only be likely if the attacker was. . .

I clear my head.

The Oxford man, who resists a name, sits at the far end of the table. Occasionally he doodles; occasionally he talks. He never eats. His spoon, always untouched, falls into the wilting mash. He stares at Moriarty.

Moriarty occupies the corner. His chair is settled directly into the wall. A Webley rests on his lap; his finger traces around the trigger guard.

My chef is nowhere to be seen. But he is heard, distantly, from the offset kitchen: cracked nails skitter down a teapot, willing the stove to boil. Wood was scarce, it appears: fires no longer keep my captors warm.

The Oxford man closed his eyes and jerked his head back and forth, smoothly, calming the waves of thought. "Where is my tea?"

"Last tea, sir."

"Sugar in it?"

"Last sugar, sir."

The Oxford man stared at me. He closed his eyes as if beginning a blink, then held them shut.

"Won't you tell us?"

To make a point of stubbornness, I swallowed.

The Oxford man returned to watching Moriarty.

A bang, a clang, a stop-and-start stutter. The Oxford man awoke—truly awoke—for the first time since he has been under my observation. He dashed over to the far side of the room, just next to the barred door which led to the outside, and seated himself. It was a rudimentary telegraphic set-up. It had been done quickly and done cheaply, but still it served.

He wrote out dots and dashes in an elongated script, then stared at them. He tilted it a bit to the left and still stared at it.

Moriarty came over to him.

“Begging your pardon, sur—sir, might I read it for you?”

“Oh, yes, quite, Moriarty. You *can* read?”

He passed the paper back and Moriarty set to translation. He leaned back to watch, his head touching Moriarty to the very slightest degree.

Their backs were toward me.

I placed the head of the spoon in my mouth, licked the potato mash off, and slid the spoon up under my sleeve.

“He demands to know who killed his. . . who killed the madman.”

I stood, softly adjusting the weight to my feet; I leaned across the table, straining my fingers along the surface. The spoon remained out of grasp. The table was eight feet long, designed for many prisoners. My maximum reach, leaning across the table, is four and one half feet. His spoon is a length too far. I glance to my chain; it hangs with two feet worth of slack.

“Taking too long, *stop*, results demanded.”

I took one step and leaned far across the table. I scabbled my fingers against the edge of his spoon.

The Oxford man looked away from the telegraph. He began to edge in my direction.

I plucked the end of his spoon between my forefinger and thumb.

“If results not produced, *stop*, one week, *stop*, advanced measures.”

I slid back, and settled the Oxford man’s spoon on the edge of my plate.

Nerves do not dull with age, nor does perfect reason subjugate them to will. A later, lesser biographer credited me with Buddhism, with Tibet, and with the meditation that eats the soul. I was not so lucky. Sweat padded out my armpits and my stomach, still gaunt from previous efforts, curled.

The Oxford man turned. He stared at me.

A conventional narrative would spill over with worries. Does he know I have the spoon? (He could not.) Does he know I want to escape? (Of course.) Can I hold the spoon in my sleeve? (Effortlessly.)

But he stared at me with the utmost weariness.

I returned my attention to the gruel.

The meal finished; Moriarty unshackled me, led me by the ends of the chain (like a child afraid of a mongrel); he placed me in my room and backed away, halting, shutting the door.

The spoon found its way to my hand.

This room was constructed in an identical manner to my previous room. Four walls, covered over with padding. The padding held up by nails.

Five minutes until they realize they are a spoon short: I analyze my walls. There are places the eye never ventures. Places we see, at a pass, yet never observe. It is common to look at the wall directly in front of you when you enter a room. Looking at the wall to the left of the door, right at shin level, is significantly less common.

Four minutes: I crouch. My bones rebel and crack.

Three minutes: I dig the bowl of the spoon under a nail's edge.

Two minutes. I circumnavigate the head of the nail. A subtle pop.

One minute: I stand, ignoring all the cries of my bones, and reach up to the edge of my window. The bars are my anchor, the spoon is my saw.

Ten seconds: footfalls rumble down the hall. A click, a pull, and my door is open.

“What the hell?”

Moriarty grabs me by the waist, hurls me to the ground.

A flurry of kicks: a blow to my face, a blow to my stomach, another blow to my face (specifically to my teeth), several blows to my genitalia, and a final blow to my kidneys.

The Oxford man stood apart. He coughed. He watched Moriarty far more than he watched me.

Moriarty stomped on my arm, pinned it with his muddy boot (mud color and composition confirm Ireland hypothesis) and pulled the spoon free. He kicked my chin. My head snapped back. Sixteen stomps on my chest. Ill-aimed blows, I might add, flailing wildly between my sternum and neck. The boot met my throat. I gasped, holding my breath and breathing an unhealthy shade of *puce*. Peter would have given my performance a single star, no recommendations, and another boot. . .

“Oh —.” He backed away; pressure relieved, I gasped as if to swallow the atmosphere.

. . . But my three friends were hardly critics.

The Oxford man offered his handkerchief, thought better of it, and pressed it to his mouth. “He ali. . . I say, is he alive?”

“Yeah.”

I should apologize for a bland description. However, I found I have little taste for reviewing that material at length. My biographer should have given you a tasteful, yet enthralling, romance. I can only offer a catalogue.

The boots step around and over me, out the door.

I grin.

My grin did not dissipate.

A day has passed and they have not fed me.

The telegraph key chitter-chatters like an old woman at tea.

My captors’ commentary is washed out, distant words without an identity to stand under.

“No.”

“Oh God no.”

“Why the hell do they want to see Livingstone?”

“You told us it’d be okay.”

“They’re going to bury *us* out under the potatoes.”

“Results are the one thing.”

“But—”

“Fetch a chair, fetch some belts. The f—*he* will find reasons to tell us all he knows.”

In the proceeding half hour: a long, drawn out scrape of a four-legged object against concrete (obviously the chair pulled across the floor), and much conceited muttering. Nothing of value.

Footsteps approached, keys chucked against each other, my door opened. I met them with the devil’s smile.

Moriarty and my chef waited at the edge, unsteady, then gripped my shoulders and propelled me forward. The hall widened out and once more I was in the main room of my prison.

“Seat him,” said the Oxford man. He stood like a caveman, back extended and stooped and shoulders out wide. Obviously, he was blocking something.

They pushed me into the chair and the slid the straps around my wrists.

“We have a surprise for you.” He held the dangling end of a telegraph wire. It smoldered dainty embers.

“You’re going to torture me. You believe it will make me talk. Your leaders are coming, and coming soon. They will be most displeased with your performance. Dear me! You will all be killed, and buried, and no-one shall be the wiser. Do me the courtesy of torture without preliminary flirtation, and I will do you the courtesy of keeping your secrets safely in check.”

He sparked the wire, and brought it close to my chest.

“I hold the power, not you. You have no name. Whatever you were in another life, you’re nothing now. You’re the echo of a strangled man. Who killed—”

“*Who killed Jack the Ripper?* Yes, it’s your very own monomania. Very well. *I did.*”

They stare, faces vacant.

“*I did. I killed him at eleven-thirty-four on November the ninth, eighteen-eighty-eight.*”

“We know—”

“*I killed him at twelve-twenty-eight on January the twenty-seventh, eighteen-ninety. Poor man. He thanked me, after all the suffering. He tried to contain it.*”

“Wha—.”

“You wished to know. Do not interrupt. *I killed him at six-twenty-nine on January the twenty-second, nineteen-oh-one.*”

“Oh lord.”

“You can’t—”

“*I did. Any further inquiries?*”

Spite is the motivation of the gods. The Oxford man thrust the line against me. There was pain, as you may imagine. The copper pain of the electric. My muscles quivered; my teeth scraped; my tongue wound itself around my mouth and let free a scream. He relented, for I was still valuable.

Spite, not at all coincidentally, is also my motivation.

“You, my dear Oxford friend, are a nancy. In public school you were forced to the sin of the Greeks, and you have continued on in that practice. Someone—your father, most likely—found you out and promptly disinherited you. He wasn’t disgusted by your actions, like the Eton boy he was, but that you never put it behind you. ”

“That’s not—”

“Simplicity itself. You nearly called me fag, denoting a public school existence; you congratulated our Irish friend with a “Show Up,” which further denotes an Etonian existence. Very few boys escape the attention of their elders at Eton. My brother was an exception; you, certainly, were not. From there, we can reconstruct much. Unlike the other boys, society couldn’t convince you to let it go. Admittedly, this is a theory. Your homosexuality is, in many ways, a firm theory built from your longing glances at Moriarty and the little touches you shower him with.”

“Wot the fu—”

“No, no, Moriarty. Confront your admirer later. We have much to discuss. What of your—”

The Oxford man recovered his senses, if only a little, and propelled the wire into my crotch. My vision dimmed out as the burn crept along; I choked on my bile; I crushed my fists so tight that my nails bit into my palms and blood dribbled down to the concrete.

Then I lifted my head.

“*As I was saying*. Moriarty, you naughty boy. What did you do to make the military hate you so? It’s a terrible thing to be discharged so young. It’s a horrible thing to murder a man and rape his daughter.”

Moriarty’s fists reflexively closed.

“Oh yes, I *know*. I know you lost your finger in a fight with an older man—I will not be so kind as to call it a duel—and I know you took his daughter, afterwards. How else does one end up with such a wicked wound along the spine? If only she had gone an inch deeper with that knife she hid in her skirt. . .”

Moriarty did nothing with his fists, and simply stared agog in the fashion of a peasant faced with Delphi.

“What the hell are you gents doing?” My chef peeked out into the main room, and stared.

“I know you,” I said. “Run away, little man, before I reveal your secrets and our friends murder you on the spot.”

My chef retreated into the kitchen.

“You,” Moriarty said.

“*You*,” Moriarty said.

“—ing *you*,” Moriarty said.

He wrapped his hands around my throat and he tackled me over backwards. He smashed me to the ground, and in the wreckage of the chair he beat my face. The Oxford man placed his hand on Moriarty's shoulder, a plaintive gesture, of course, but Moriarty sprung upon his new target. A vague, slapping blow hit the Oxford man's shoulder; a second, proper blow connected with the Oxford man's face.

My chef returned, now.

"Stop."

No-one stopped. Though I did him the courtesy of slowing my movements.

"— Stop. Men. Stop."

Moriarty crouched over the Oxford man. "Touch me again, I dare ye."

My chef stepped between them. "Stop."

Moriarty threw the Oxford man down and stepped up to my chef.

"Yeah."

He grabbed me by my collar; he breathed hot breath in my face; he hauled me to my cell, and locked the door with all the anger one can inflict on an iron door.

I set to work on my nails.

Work completed, I held my breath.

My chef came to my room at his appointed time. He opened the door, prepared to collect me for breakfast. All I heard was a sharp intake of breath, and I held myself all the more still.

Three facts force themselves upon him.

First: the padding from the left wall had been pulled down. The nails were obviously removed. The padding lay tumbled and turned over itself in a fat pile.

Second: The padding on the forward wall, directly under the window, was torn in two distinct places—as if their prisoner had taken the nails from the left wall and carved himself footholds. Neat, small, Sherpa-guides.

Third: The window bars. One, the third over to the right, was gouged out, pulled away, removed, and presumably in the imprisoned's employ. The second-most bar, once planted directly in the middle, was not uprooted. It hung only from above, shuddering in the brief wind.

All of this he saw.

"Oh hell."

What remained, he refused to observe:

The crumpled padding rose and fell, perceptibly, with breath.

The forward padding, leading step-like to the heavens, could not support a man. Tatters ran rich through the material; to plant a foot in one of the steps would send the fabric ripping down the ground.

The hole carved through the window was three and one-sixth inches too small to permit my body.

He stood stock silent. By the sound of his breath, his mouth had fallen slack. Shortly thereafter, his footfalls fell away, double steps down the hallway. Vague shouts filtered back.

“Gone” was his chief refrain.

Three sets of footsteps return.

Silence. I slow my breathing.

They stop still at the doorway, seeing but never observing, looking over my breathless rise and fall as the stirring of the wind. They neither investigate nor look; the Oxford man beats his feet on the concrete.

Profanity was a height too high for Moriarty. He huffed out from clenched teeth.

The Oxford man’s muffled voice (presumably buried behind a kerchief): “Find him. Damn you. Find him.”

Moriarty spoke now. The stress chipped away his façade. “This is on *your* head.”

The Oxford man pulled away his handkerchief. “To hell with you, nigger.”

“Hell with you.”

Moriarty wrapped his hand up around the Oxford man’s head and smashed it into the bare concrete. He slid down the wall and sat, crack-skulled, at the base. An effortless fall, as they all are.

Moriarty coughed. “They clean up the messes, Josiah. Making sure we aren’t part of the mess. Cleaned it for ‘em. They might appreciate that. Grab the rifles. One more mess.”

Their footfalls filed through: down the short hall, around the cabinet which held the firearms, out through the door and the sodding way down the slope.

Though *bars* may imprison a logician, cloths do not. I shrugged them away. The Oxford man stared at me with eyes dredged from a tidal wave. I wrapped my hand around his throat.

No pulse.

I traced my thumbs up to his eyes and shut them. A small mercy for a man without.

My joints and bones cursed me, but I rose.

My home was deserted. I inspected the rooms, found nothing of use or interest besides a box of matches, and turned to search the table more thoroughly. A box of cartridges, over-turned and half-empty, spilled out over the table. Long, thin bullets unsuited for anything but a deer. I ran my fingers over them. My friends filled their pockets in great haste: no time for the petty motions of chambering. I claimed the available bullets—six in all—and stepped to the telegraph.

It was unexceptional and unprofessional. A compact set-up with only two points: origin and termination. A message sent from here would certainly find itself near to my persecutors' hands.

Time is a scarce commodity, but the dramatic always triumphs.

I unearth an artifact from my past and tap it out.

come if convenient stop if inconvenient come all the same

Missive sent, I step out the door.

I strain against the sunlight.

I was confronted by a cracked-egg island whose cliffs rose up to all sides. Grass wanders upward, pell-mell, until the rocks choke it to weeds. The fourth side, leading off to the right of my prison, was a softer slope of grass which tapered off into the horizon.

We existed in a depression: small, stable, surrounded. The building was a modern amalgamation of concrete: a box with sublimated windows, devoid of character. The slopes were open. Trees proved rare. The only structures were the telegraph poles leading a drunken way up the slope to the cliff above.

Two pairs of footprints fled out the door.

The chief's footsteps, unsteady and fat, fell off down the impression toward the center.

He would pose no threat.

Moriarty's footprints ran upward—note the toes more deeply impressed into the grass than the heels—and carried off into the same horizon which blinded me.

The plan was as elegant as my captors could summon. Moriarty, it would seem, departed for the only escape. It would provide a sniper's paradise: a rookery from which to take his prey. The chef was a hound; I was a fox; he was to flush me into fire.

Dear me!

A fool listens for radio chatter; a learned man would search, hopeless, for the glint of a scope. I crouched perpendicular to the footprints racing up into the mountain. Unknown factors were summarily ignored—the most likely course of a man who runs is straight ahead. If Moriarty carried on running straight ahead he would reach the summit of the cracked eggshell (oh, how my biographer has influenced me!) in twelve minutes and forty-seven seconds (give a take a moment). At which point, *ah yes*, he would choose the right hand path. It's all a right handed man can do. I fall a level in my own estimation when I hold my breath and wait for the telltale glimmer.

And, like the fool I occasionally am, I was rewarded with a scope's reflection.

Moriarty's location thus identified, I trotted to the opposite side of the building, just below some brush. I knelt, my bones quiet and joints unprotesting, and lay my bullets by the dry roots. The Oxford man's match is struck, is set, and I watch the bush consumed.

This will gain attention, of course.

I resume my position on the side of the building next to Moriarty's path. I count.

One. The cowardly smoke of a newborn fire.

Two. The bone-breaking crack of adolescent fire.

Three. The fizz of a settled, middle-aged fire.

I do not wait for four.

I rush up the slope through the undergrowth just to the left of Moriarty's path.

I have four minutes until my fire persuades my cartridges to explode: from there, two and a half minutes of chaos, two minutes while they watch the bush like frightened cattle, and two minutes while Moriarty and my chef search the newly defined (and far smaller) parameters.

Providing myself ten and a half minutes to climb the side of the cracked-egg island.

Margin of error: two minutes and seventeen seconds during which they are likely to spot me and fire upon me (likely killing me).

An acceptable margin. I begin.

Old men are not equipped for a run. My muscles quaver, like drunk men on stilts, and drive me into zags. My bones rebel, the natural thinning of age exacerbated by my Spartan diet. My vision blurs (perhaps the chemicals of my youth have returned to extract their price).

Thirty seconds.

I wheeze by a tree, counting down like the fool I so often am.

Bang! my biographer would tell me to write. But I am content to state that the gunpowder reacted as expected.

“There!” cried my Chef. His voice listed and flirted with the breeze. He was far away.

And, proving my corollary expectations, the initial burst of my fire spurred both my hunters to waste rounds on the false target. Capital!

I rushed out of the brush and up the barren slopes.

Six more shots were fired. Unsteady, irregular shots. They began to divine the truth. In most men, the subconscious is better equipped for solving problems than the facilities of the conscious. Much time is lost ferrying discoveries from the submerged to the surface.

I have transgressed my one and a half minutes of my two minute and seventeen second margin of error. I am nearly to Moriarty’s rookery. The glint of his scope is inescapable, now, and I see his dirty hands choking the rifle. His face is hidden, and he is crouched low. His center of gravity, therefore, is low. I cannot knock him over from a run, nor hope for the necessary pause from which I may launch into a Baritsu hold.

I shall play the part of the fool once more and draw him to me. I step on a twig. The snap is the subtle mistake of the city-born.

Moriarty turns, grins, pulls the trigger. The force of the detonation is slight. He suffers virtually no kickback. He is so self-satisfied that he lowers the barrel of the gun. His conscious mind tells him that he has made the shot. The old man groaning in the bushes has met his bullet, and lay dying. He stands and comes toward that old man.

Perception is a universe away from reality.

I fell before the shot.

I am an old fool, perhaps, but I am also a live one.

“So I’ve bagged the great and mighty Sh—”

I strike upward, stabbing my heel into his stomach. He totters, momentarily unbalanced; in that moment, I regain a steady stance and strike the flat of my hand for his neck.

He rolls with the force of my blow—and in that roll he hurls a roundhouse into my face. He does not draw back after that blow, but grabs my neck and forces me back.

Ah. There’s the ledge. The drop is fifty feet. Rocks are below. The cliff face, so far as easily observed, is sheer. Free of handholds and protuberances.

So we come to this again. Always a fall.

Meanwhile, Moriarty is choking me.

I lean to the opposite side and we roll into the grass. Moriarty falls upon me, his thumbs crushing my windpipe. But my own hands find his neck.

Nerve centers are an eternal weakness. Difficult to defend, impossible to resist. My thumbs plumb his neck. His arms go limp. He is not reasonable enough to kick. He only stares—the state of a beast. I pull him semi-upright and drag him along to the cliff’s limit. I grip under his shoulders. I pull him to unsteady feet. Yes, good, he will certainly break my fall.

I speak.

“Mens sana in corpore sano.”

“What?”

“Latin, boy.”

We take one step.