

When the Tripods Came

By John Christopher



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Experience the beginning of the Tripods' reign in this prequel to the classic alien trilogy ideal for fans of Rick Yancey's *The 5th Wave* and Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Shadow Children* series.


When it comes to alien invasions, bad things come in threes.

Three landings: one in England, one in Russia, and one in the United States.

Three long legs, crushing everything in their paths, with three metallic arms, snacking out to embrace—and then discard—their helpless victims.

Three evil beings, called Tripods, which will change life on Earth forever.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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

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When the Tripods Came



ONE

An explosion of noise woke me. It sounded as if a dozen express trains were about to hit the shed. I rolled over in my blanket, trying to get out of the way, and was aware of a blaze of orange, lighting up boxes and bits of old farm equipment and tackle. An ancient rusting tractor looked briefly like an overgrown insect.

“What was that, Laurie?” Andy asked. I could see him sitting up, between me and the window.

“I don’t know.”

Both light and sound faded and died. A dog started barking—deep-throated, a Labrador maybe. I got up and walked to the window, banging my shin on something in the dark. It was dark outside, too, moon and stars hidden by cloud. A light came on in the farmhouse, which was a couple of hundred meters away, just below the ridge.

I said, “It’s not raining. What was it?”

“Didn’t someone at the camp say something about an artillery range on the moor?”

“Nowhere near here, though.”

“Whatever they were firing could have gone astray.”

Rubbing my shin, I said, “It didn’t sound like a shell. And a shell wouldn’t produce fireworks like that.”

“A rocket, maybe.” He yawned loudly. “It’s all quiet now, anyway. No sweat. Go to sleep. We’ve a long trek in the morning.”

I stood by the window for a while. Eventually the light in the house went out: the farmer presumably took the same view as Andy. In the pitch black I felt my way to the pile of straw which served as a bed. This was less fun than it had seemed the previous evening; there was little protection from the hardness of the earth floor, and once awake I knew all about the aches in my muscles.

Andy was already asleep. I blamed him for our being here—for volunteering us into the orienteering expedition in the first place, and then for insisting on a left fork which had taken us miles out of our way. It

had looked as though we would have to spend the night on the moor, but we'd come across this isolated farm as dusk was thickening. The rules were not to ask for help, so we'd settled down in the shed.

I thought my aches, and resenting Andy, would keep me awake, but I was dead tired. We had set out early from summer camp, and it had been a long day's slog. Drifting into sleep again, I was half aware of another explosion, but it was a distant one, and I was too weary really to wake up—I couldn't even be sure I wasn't dreaming.

• • •

Andy woke me with the gray light of dawn filtering in. He said, "Listen."

"What?"

"Listen!"

I struggled into wakefulness. The noise was coming from the direction of the farmhouse, but further away, a succession of loud thumpings, heavy and mechanical.

"Farm machinery?" I suggested.

"I don't think so."

Listening more carefully, I didn't either. The thumps came at intervals of a second or less, and they were getting nearer. There was even a sensation of the ground shaking under me.

"Something heading this way," Andy said. "Something big, by the sound of it."

We crowded together at the small window of the shed. The sun hadn't risen, but to the east the farmhouse was outlined against a pearly sky. Smoke from a chimney rose almost straight: farmers were early risers. It looked like a good day for the trek back to camp. Then I saw what was coming into view on the other side of the house.

The top appeared first, an enormous gray-green hemispherical capsule, flat side down, which seemed to be floating ponderously in midair. But it wasn't floating: a weird stiltlike leg moved in a vast arc across the sky and planted itself just to the right of the farmhouse. As it crashed down a second leg appeared, passing over the house and landing between it and the shed. I could see a third leg, too, which if it followed suit would come to ground close to us, if not on top of us. But at that point, it stopped. The gigantic object, more than twenty meters high, stood straddling the house.

A band of bright green glassy panels ran horizontally along the side of the capsule. It produced an effect that was a cross between multiple staring eyes and a grinning mouth. It wasn't a pleasant grin.

"Someone's making a film." Andy's voice was unsteady. I turned to him and he looked as scared as I felt. "That must be it. A science-fiction movie."

"So where are the cameras?" I felt my voice was coming out wrong, too.

"They probably have to get it into position first."

I didn't know whether he believed it. I didn't.

Something was moving beneath the capsule, curling and twisting and stretching out. It was like an elephant's trunk, or a snake, except that it was silvery and metallic. It corkscrewed down towards the roof of the house and brushed lightly against it. Then it moved to the chimney stack and grasped it with a curling tip. Bricks sprayed like confetti, and we heard them crashing onto the slates.

I was shivering. Inside the house a woman screamed. A door at the back burst open, and a man in shirt and trousers came out. He stared up at the machine looming above him and started running. Immediately a second tentacle uncurled, this time fast and purposeful. The tip caught him before he'd gone ten meters, fastened round his waist, and plucked him from the ground. He was screaming, too, now.

The tentacle lifted him up in front of the row of panels, and his screams turned to muffled groaning. After a few moments the tentacle twisted back on itself. A lenslike opening appeared at the base of the capsule; it carried him towards it and thrust him through. I thought of someone holding a morsel of food on a fork before popping it into his mouth, and felt sick.

His groans ended as the tentacle withdrew, and the opening closed. The woman in the house had also become quiet; but the silence was even more frightening. Resting on its spindly legs, the machine had the look of an insect digesting its prey. I remembered my glimpse of the derelict tractor in the night; this insect was as tall as King Kong.

For what seemed a long time, nothing happened. The thing didn't stir, and there was no sound or movement from the house. All was still; not even a bird chirped. The tentacle hovered in midair, motionless and rigid.

When, after a minute or so, the tentacle did move, it raised itself higher, as though making a salute. For a second or two it hung in the air, before slamming down violently against the roof. Slates scattered, and rafters showed through a gapping hole. The woman started to shriek again.

Methodically the tentacle smashed the house, and as methodically picked over the ruins, like a scavenger going through a garbage can. The shrieking stopped, leaving just the din of demolition. A second tentacle set to work alongside the first, and a third joined them.

They probed deep into the rubble, lifting things up to the level of the panels. Most of what was picked up was dropped or tossed aside—chairs, a sideboard, a double bed, a bathtub dangling the metal pipes from which it had been ripped. A few were taken inside: I noticed an electric kettle and a television set.

At last it was over, and dust settled as the tentacles retracted under the capsule.

"I think we ought to get away from here," Andy said. His voice was so low I could hardly hear him.

"How far do you think it can see?"

"I don't know. But if we dodge out quickly, and get round the back . . ."

I gripped his arm. Something was moving at the base of the rubble that had been the farmhouse: a black dog wriggled free and started running across the farmyard. It covered about ten meters before a tentacle arrowed towards it. The dog was lifted, howling, in front of the panels, and held there. I thought it was going to be taken inside, as the man had been; instead the tentacle flicked it away. Briefly the dog was a black blur

against the dawn light, then a crumpled silent heap.

The sick feeling was back, and one of my legs was trembling. I thought of my first sight of the Eiffel Tower, the summer my mother left and Ilse came to live with us—and my panicky feeling over the way it stretched so far up into the sky. This was as if the Eiffel Tower had moved—had smashed a house to bits and swallowed up a man . . . tossed a dog to its death the way you might throw away an apple core.

Time passed more draggingly than I ever remembered. I looked at my watch, and the display read 05:56. I looked again after what seemed like half an hour, and it said 05:58. The sky was getting lighter and there was first a point of gold, then a sliver, finally a disk of sun beyond the ruins of the house. I looked at my watch again. It was 06:07.

Andy said, “Look!”

The legs hadn’t moved but the capsule was tilting upwards and beginning a slow rotation. The row of panels was moving to the left. Soon we might be out of the field of vision and have a chance of sneaking away. But as the rotation continued, a second row of panels came into view. It could see all round.

When it had traversed a hundred and eighty degrees, the rotation stopped. After that, nothing happened. The monster just stayed there, fixed, as leaden minutes crawled by.

The first plane came over soon after eight. A fighter made two runs, east to west and then west to east at a lower level. The thing didn’t move. A quarter of an hour later a helicopter circled round, taking photographs, probably. It was nearly midday before the armored brigade arrived. Tanks and other tracked vehicles drew up on open farmland, and, in the bit of the farm lane in view, we could see an important-looking car and some trucks, including a TV van, all keeping a careful distance.

After that, nothing happened for another long time. We learned later this was the period in which our side was attempting to make radio contact, trying different frequencies without result. Andy got impatient, and again suggested making a run for it, towards the tanks.

I said, “The fact it hasn’t moved doesn’t mean it won’t. Remember the dog.”

“I do. It might also decide to smash this hut.”

“And if we run, and it starts something and the army starts something back . . . we’re likely to catch it from both sides.”

He reluctantly accepted that. “Why hasn’t the army done something?”

“What do you think they ought to do?”

“Well, not just sit there.”

“I suppose they don’t want to rush things. . . .”

I broke off as an engine started up, followed by a rumble of tracks. We ran to the window. A single tank was moving forward. It had a pole attached to its turret, and a white flag fluttering from the pole.

The tank lurched across the field and stopped almost directly beneath the capsule. The engine switched off, and I heard a sparrow chirruping outside the shed. Then, unexpectedly, there was a burst of classical music.

I asked, “Where’s that coming from?”

“From the tank, I think.”

“But why?”

“Maybe they want to demonstrate that we’re civilized, not barbarians. It’s that bit from a Beethoven symphony, isn’t it—the one that’s sung as a European anthem?”

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“I don’t know.” Andy pointed. “Look.”

The machine was showing signs of movement. Beneath the capsule a tentacle uncurled. It extended down towards the tank and began waving gently.

“What’s it doing?” I asked.

“Maybe it’s keeping time.”

The weird thing was, he was right; it was moving in rhythm with the music. A second tentacle emerged, dipped, and brushed against the turret. As though it were getting the hang of things, the first tentacle started moving faster, in a more positive beat. The second felt its way round the tank from front to rear, then made a second approach from the side, moving over it and probing underneath. The tip dug down, rocking the tank slightly, and reemerged to complete an embrace. The tank rocked more violently as it was lifted, at first just clear of the ground, then sharply upward.

Abruptly the music gave way to the stridence of machine-gun fire. Tracer bullets flamed against the sky. The tank rose in the tentacle’s grip until it was level with the panels. It hung there, spitting out sparks.

But pointlessly; at that angle the tracers were scouring empty sky. And they stopped abruptly, as the tentacle tightened its grip; armorplate crumpled like tinfoil. For two or three seconds it squeezed the tank, before uncurling and letting it drop. The tank fell like a stone, landing on its nose and balancing for an instant before toppling over. There was a furrow along the side where it had been compressed to less than half its original width.

Andy said, “That was a Challenger.” He sounded shaken, but not as shaken as I felt. I could still see that terrible careless squeeze, the tank dropped like a toffee paper.

When I looked out again, one of the tentacles had retracted, but the other was waving still, and still in the rhythm it had picked up from the music. I wanted to run—somewhere, anywhere, not caring what came next—but I couldn’t move a muscle. I wondered if anyone in the tank had survived. I didn’t see how they could have.

Then, unexpectedly and shatteringly, there was a roar of aircraft as the fighter-bombers, which had been on standby, whooshed in from the south, launching rockets as they came. Of the six they fired, two scored hits. I

saw the long spindly legs shatter, the capsule tilt and sway and crash. It landed between the ruins of the farmhouse and the wrecked tank, with an impact that shook the shed.

I could hardly believe how quickly it was over—and how completely. But there was the capsule lying on its side, with broken bits of leg sticking out. As we stared, a second wave of fighter-bombers swooped in, pulverizing the remains.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jordan Weatherspoon:

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