

JOHN McNICHOL

THE TRIPODS ATTACK!

THE YOUNG CHESTERTON CHRONICLES
BOOK 1

Imagio
CATHOLIC FICTION
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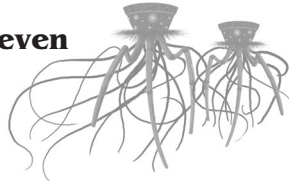
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Seven



"I never could see anything wrong in sensationalism; and I am sure our society is suffering more from secrecy than from flamboyant revelations." — GKC

The train sped on through fields of gray grass and sickly trees. Herb had fallen asleep, and Gilbert looked out the window and began to wonder if there were any bright flowers in the whole of England. The air was a little better in the country than in the city, but as Gilbert could see, the factory smokestacks had left their mark here, too, scarring and blackening huge swaths of once-green forests and fertile fields. Trees that had once stood so proudly were now little more than blackened twigs. It was nearly summer; shouldn't things have bloomed by now?

The dreary countryside made Gilbert think about the fields that had surrounded his family's country home in Minnesota. *This summer*, he thought glumly, *I would have been swimming and getting ready for my last year of high school.*

He knew the arguments against complaining. He'd learned a trade, and any money he made from now until the end of his life would be his own. Still, he also knew that the quality of his new life would depend on how he performed his duties.

"You'll be paid for your skills, Gilbert," his father had said a couple of years ago, during a carriage ride. "Too many fellows in university forget that. They spend years getting degrees in languages, poetry, philosophy, or other some such, and then cry back to their parents if they can't make a living in this world. Knowledge for its own sake is well and good, but only after life's responsibilities are taken care of."

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Now that he'd had a taste of the kind of life he'd be leading without an education, the thought of pursuing higher learning jumped into Gilbert's head rather forcefully. *University may not be an option for me*, he thought. *But perhaps if I could pull this newspaper assignment off, I'll be able to get and keep a position that I wouldn't need a degree to prosper in.*

But to prosper, I'll need a good story. And a good story starts with good research. He pulled the folder full of paper out of his satchel. Miraculously, even after his beating by Ed and the Gray Mare Boys, its contents were intact.

It would be a few hours before he arrived at the Woking station; a little reading now could save him a lot of embarrassment later when he tried to file his story. There were several articles in the folder, all printed and clipped within the past ten days. He pulled out the first one and began to read.

It was fascinating.

A large meteorite had streaked through the sky the night before and left an enormous crater just outside the small town of Woking. Gilbert noted the time of the meteor's impact. He would have been just drifting off to sleep after his twelve-hour shift in the clacking room when the meteorite had lit up the night sky with a green aura that had been seen as far as London. Gilbert still marveled that little Oliver had had enough energy to catch a glimpse of the thing, much less be carousing in a pub at the time.

The Woking locals had learned the meteor was actually a giant cylinder, seemingly buried in the mounds of earth at the center of the enormous crater it had dug out with its impact. The cylinder's cap was about thirty yards across, but they could only guess at its height, or how deep it had been buried. At the time the story had been filed, the cylinder was still so hot that no one could approach closer than ten paces.

Gilbert looked out the window, trying to imagine whether a giant crater would improve the look of the dry countryside. He flipped through several

more articles and found it odd that none of them had to do with the Woking meteorite. A museum had been dedicated to the Babbage engines; a group of Luddites had rioted at a factory that had dared to install an assembly line; sightings of some mysterious airship, shaped like half a soccer ball and allegedly floating through the air of the Sierra mountains back in the Republic of Southern California. There was even a piece on some mad inventor, claiming that he had made an artificial humanoid out of metal, powered by steam and instructed by miniature Babbage engines and punchcards.

“Twaddle,” his dad would have called it. It all amounted to a waste of time and energy. Even if you could use punchcards to make something like a mechanical man, what would be the purpose?

Gilbert looked over to the deeply breathing form of his new friend and decided he was feeling a little sleepy himself. But there was only one more article to go through. Gilbert forced his eyes open long enough to read it.

He was glad he did, since the last article was the oddest of all. It seemed some astronomer outside the city had noticed vast clouds of brightly colored gas blasting up from the planet Mars a few weeks ago. Furthermore, identical flashes from the same location on Mars were observed each subsequent day for the next ten days. After this, the eruptions ended completely.

Volcanic eruptions on Mars? Sightings of ball-shaped airships? What did that have to do with a meteorite buried in Woking? *Curiouser and curiouser*, thought Gilbert. Far from giving him relevant information, the head office had given him a jumble of tales related only by their oddball natures.

“Interesting reading?” said a voice over his shoulder. Gilbert turned and saw that the voice belonged to a short, almost plump man who stood behind him. The small man wore a pair of horn-rimmed glasses resting on a round, pinkish face that was very nearly perfectly clean-shaven. He was not smiling, but his eyes didn’t frown, either. He had on a wide, black-brimmed hat and wore a black coat and trousers with a white collar.

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“Um, yes,” said Gilbert. He felt a little uncomfortable in the presence of a priest, having been raised in a home that couldn’t exactly be called religious. At his school, the Catholic religion had been viewed as something like an exotic cult — something to be studied and looked at oddly, but never taken seriously as truth. Gilbert was just thinking about asking whether it was true that Catholics worshiped the Devil’s wife when the priest spoke again.

“May I join you? I love train rides, but the things are dreadfully boring when one has to stare out a windowpane by oneself for hours on end.”

“Well,” started Gilbert. Inside, his discomfort struggled against years of training in etiquette and civility. Then Gilbert remembered Herb’s disparaging comment about priests. It would give the guy a huge shock, he thought, to wake up sitting beside a cleric of the religion most hated by the world’s rationalists. “Sure,” Gilbert said with a sly smile, “have a seat. My name’s Gilbert. Now that you mention it, the company would be nice. Especially since my friend’s fallen asleep.”

“A good thing to get, where we’re going,” said the priest as he sat down, keeping his voice to a whisper for Herb’s sake. “Sleep is a luxury that not all can afford these days.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gilbert. Sleep was free, after all, and you could do it most anywhere.

“Sleeping is something done to renew oneself. But for the many who work long days in the factories, sleep is only an escape, a way to pretend for a few fleeting hours that there isn’t an Overseer at your heels. Would you agree?”

Gilbert looked at the little man again. He was no more than five feet tall, with a florid, moon-shaped face that was at least sixty years old. Gilbert instinctively knew he was bald beneath the wide-brimmed black hat.

“You know, Father, come to think of it, you’re right. I’ve been working in a factory room myself for the last eight months. Most of the time, sleep was

something I just did between shifts, right after and before eating. I'm surprised you know much about that."

"Indeed!" said the little priest. "And why is that?"

"Where I'm from, priests are known much more for grabbing money out of the parishioners' purses than for their fourteen-hour work days."

"Really? And where was this where-I'm-from, exactly?"

"Minnesota," said Gilbert. "There, if you were a papist, you were treated suspiciously, at least in our town."

"Such a pity," said the priest. "Those who know the least about the Church seem to be the ones who fault it the most. I've had my share of eighteen-, twenty-, and seventy-two-hour days in service to the Holy Father."

"No kidding? How do you know about life in a factory?"

"The same way you do, young man. Although I suspect you know less than you think, having worked at a punchcard machine instead of an engine or on an assembly line."

Gilbert started. "Scuse me?" he said. How had this guy figured out what Gilbert did — or used to do — for a living?

"I can tell your profession," the priest said, wiping his nose discreetly with a handkerchief, "from the machine oil that's soiled your fingers, but not your face or clothes. Only clackers have that kind of oil pattern on them. Much of my work in the last few years has been with workers that the industrial revolution has chewed up in its gears and spit back into the slums."

"Amputees?"

"Yes," said the priest quickly. "I've learned more than many care to learn about what life has become for workers in the bowels of a factory. At least once a week in my parish, a man loses a hand or a foot in the maw of a piston, a shredder, or punchpress. I minister to their needs as best I can, as I've been asked to by my . . . *order*, within the Church."

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“So, you teach them a few Hail Marys and send them on their way?”

“No,” replied the priest, “unless they’d benefit from that. I first try to find them relief, and work they can do even in their crippled states. Then I minister to their spiritual needs as I might. But when a man has lost his job because a machine has just eaten his right hand, the last thing he wants is to hear how his pain is part of God’s great plan. No matter how true that may be.”

“I should say,” mumbled Herb. He’d been listening to the conversation for some time, while pretending to be asleep. “Religion doesn’t do much more than keep poor blokes like that quiet so the mucky-mucks on top can keep their high places. Much like the high place you’ve got now over the rabble and the mids here on the train.”

“Young man, there are those who misuse religion, true. But blaming religion itself is quite the wrongheaded approach. Do we blame steam power when a child is scalded by her mother’s tea? True religion makes man a noble creature, and gives people like me the strength to do our jobs when people like the amputees lose theirs. And, in all fairness, I had a ticket for the lows, as you call them. I was offered this seat by a friend who is a porter here, and felt it would be . . . *right* to take the seat, this time.”

Herb looked at the priest for a moment and realized he would not get anywhere in an argument. “I should think,” he said, rising quickly, “that a train like this deserves a once-over before we commit ourselves to sleeping or talking our journey away. What say you, Gilbert?”

Gilbert looked at the priest. Although the little man’s mouth was straight, his eyes danced cheerfully. “I’ll be here later, young Gilbert. By the by, my name is Father Brown.” Gilbert shook the priest’s hand gravely, but Herb had already begun walking away. “And mind who your friends are, Gilbert. They can lead you places you’d not expect. Or you could do the same.”