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Prologue—The Strange Fate of Six French Crusaders. 3

PART I—LONDON

- ONE—*Hidden Mystery of the Ages* 9
- TWO—*Private Opportunities* 17
- THREE—*Sevenoaks* 27
- FOUR—*Success!* 41

Prologue—The Knights Templar 61

PART II—TURKEY

- FIVE—*Going Public* 67
- SIX—*Intertwined Thoughts* 75
- SEVEN—*The Interview* 81
- EIGHT—*What Can It Mean?* 95
- NINE—*Operation Noah* 107

Prologue—Discovery of Ancient Mysteries 139

PART III—ETHIOPIA

- TEN—*Surprising New Best-Seller* 147
- ELEVEN—*Plans* 155
- TWELVE—*Ancient Land of Mystery* 161

Prologue—Jeremiah’s Secret 177

PART IV—AMSTERDAM

- THIRTEEN—*Clues and Catastrophe.* 185
- FOURTEEN—*Despondency.* 195

Prologue—Bezalel, Cunning Craftsman of Metals 203

PART V—ENGLAND

- FIFTEEN—*Hidden Message from Antiquity 211*
- SIXTEEN—*The Quest Begins Anew. 219*
- SEVENTEEN—*Schemes 229*
- EIGHTEEN—*Doubts. 237*
- NINETEEN—*Traditions 243*
- TWENTY—*Unlikely Benefactress. 253*
- TWENTY-ONE—*Thief and Fraud! 259*

Prologue—Menyelek, Son of the Wise Man 277

PART VI—FRANCE

- TWENTY-TWO—*Defection in the Ranks 285*
- TWENTY-THREE—*Clues in Chartres 293*
- TWENTY-FOUR—*Shocker! 311*
- TWENTY-FIVE—*Letter Bomb 317*

Prologue—Lineage of Darkness 325

PART VII—BELGRADE

- TWENTY-SIX—*Confusion 331*
- TWENTY-SEVEN—*Friends and Foes 337*
- TWENTY-EIGHT—*Disappearance 343*
- TWENTY-NINE—*Flight 351*
- THIRTY—*Vigil at Sevenoaks. 361*

Prologue—Anticipated Feast 379

PART VIII—JERUSALEM

- THIRTY-ONE—*Prophet or Angel? 383*
- THIRTY-TWO—*Technology from the East. 395*
- THIRTY-THREE—*High Tech to Solve an Ancient Mystery . . . 405*
- THIRTY-FOUR—*Scanning for Clues beneath the Temple Mount 415*
- THIRTY-FIVE—*In the Steps of the Prophet 431*
- THIRTY-SIX—*The Archaeologist Who Cried Ark 453*
- THIRTY-SEVEN—*Cataclysm 461*
- THIRTY-EIGHT—*Hidden in Time. 471*
- THIRTY-NINE—*Truth to Change a World. 483*
- FORTY—*Nothing Is Hid That Shall Not Be Revealed 487*

The Strange Fate of Six French Crusaders

Jerusalem, A.D. 1121

Six men, in two columns of three, shouldering stout poles of acacia wood, ascended a low, dark, rocky incline out of a small burial chamber beneath the ancient city of David.

Five of the six wore around their necks emblems which signified their Christian faith and crusader loyalties. The sixth and leader of the band, one Hughes de Payns, was a Frenchman of the order known as The Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon. He had enlisted these crusaders for a secret assignment which, he intimated, could make them rich beyond imagination . . . if, he added solemnly, they could be discreet, and do exactly as they were told.

Their burden was of exceeding weight. Yet expressly for such a discovery had de Payns left his homeland and sojourned to this distant land. The others of his order knew nothing of today's exploration.

The air was still dusty with particles from the recent tremor which, as if by miracle, had opened the way to the priceless treasure. The footing beneath them was uneven, and every step fraught with peril.

While none would dare scoff openly at the old tales about contact with the gleaming surface, it was doubtful whether they actually believed them. Yet with difficulty they were struggling not to put the legend to the test. The way was narrow, stones cluttered the path underfoot, and one or two wondered if the earth had altogether settled beneath them.

It was a dangerous time and place to be transporting an object so heavy, and for which such delicacy and care were required.

Indeed, their way was more treacherous than they realized.



It had been three weeks before when de Payns stood in another vaulted underground cavern, gazing about in wonder with a different group of companions, his eight noble friends who had come here with him from France.

Two held large torches, the others various picks and digging implements. Only moments

HIDDEN IN TIME

before they had broken through stones and rubble to the spot. Dust from their work continued to settle in the tomblike air.

All at once it seemed to Hughes de Payns that perhaps the rumors cherished for two decades had basis in fact. He had come to the Holy Land and heard the unbelievable reports in 1104, and had been waiting for this revelation ever since.

"These stones under our feet appear marble," said one, a certain Godeffroi de St. Omer, de Payns' second in command. "At one time they obviously lay in the open air."

His comrades now joined in speculation.

"From the old temple ground?" suggested one.

"From Herod's temple, to be sure," rejoined St. Omer.

"The stones around us are rubble from destruction by Emperor Titus."

"And perhaps other destructions," remarked André de Montbard.

As the discussion continued, all offered various opinions concerning the origin of the surface.

"It may even be that we are standing on the stones of Zerubbabel's temple, not Herod's," said St. Omer.

"Or Solomon's," suggested Montbard.

"It doesn't matter," said de Payns. "We must get deeper."

Their leader was not at present interested in the history of the place. He had studied the site more than any other man alive. He knew every detail of what had occurred on this mount, from David's sacrifice on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite in 1020 B.C. until the present. It was the secrets of what had gone on underground here that possessed him, not what had transpired above it.

"Now that we have broken through to this level," he said, "our next objective must be to find our way below the shetiyyah."

"But the Dome mosque is on top of it," said his friend St. Omer.

"Yes, Godeffroi," he rejoined, "and we are under it."

As they continued to discuss their options and the best means of continuing the excavation, the conversation was not in Hebrew or any other Middle Eastern language of the region. These were not natives to this land. The fluid French tongue flowed from their lips, for all were French noblemen.

They had arrived in Jerusalem two years before on a quest far more secretive than the crusades which had originally brought such numbers of Europeans to this land.



Hughes de Payns and his eight fellow Frenchmen excavated and explored for two weeks under the Muslim mosque after their discovery of the marble floor.

They had penetrated several layers lower and had come to a larger cave, off which many

¹Literally, *stone of foundation*: the large boulder purported to be the mountaintop where Abraham offered Isaac, later said to have formed the floor of the Holy of Holies of Solomon's temple, and still later over which the Dome of the Rock was constructed.

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

passages spread into the blackness. Water trickled through the bottom of one. Again speculation was vigorous.

"There are so many tunnels and caverns—what are they all?"

"Tombs, hiding places, perhaps even dried-up cisterns."

"The Romans and the Hebrew King Hezekiah were geniuses at bringing water into the city from the surrounding hills."

"But Hezekiah's tunnel is to the south."

"Another canal ran from the north down to the Gihon Spring."

"Many shafts and chambers are connected with burial sites as well as water systems."

"How do we know which tunnels to follow?" asked St. Omer.

"We shall probe those that descend," said their leader. "I am convinced we will find what we seek below the temple. We will investigate the tunnels two by two. Keep your lamps strong. Do not lose your way."

Two hours later, all gathered again in the same chamber. Eagerly they discussed their explorations. Only de Payns and his partner were absent.

At length their steps were heard returning from the depths of a black corridor. De Payns emerged, followed by his comrade, stooped from the tunnel's low roof.

"Did you find anything?" asked Montbard.

"At first I thought so," replied de Payns. "We moved steadily downward. But the way led too far away from the Temple Mount, toward the northwest as it seemed to me. We went for a good distance, hoping it would turn and descend to a lower level. Eventually we were forced back. Rubble and stones barred our way."

"Why don't we break through?"

"It leads in the wrong direction," replied de Payns. "By the time we could go no farther, we were outside the city wall. There could be nothing out there. If that which we seek is in Jerusalem, it is beneath the mount, hidden in some temple crypt, or possibly south, in the direction of Hezekiah's excavations."

He paused, as if debating with himself as he reflected again on the direction of the tunnel from which he had just come.

"No one would bury so priceless a treasure outside the city among the cemeteries," he mused. "It gave life and victory to the ancient Hebrews," he added in a rare moment of prophetic unctious. "No tomb is capable of that."



In the intervening days, however, the conviction grew within Hughes de Payns that perhaps he had been mistaken.

He had felt strange sensations in the tunnel leading out below the hilly region of the tombs. But a peculiar forboding he could not explain kept him from speaking of it to his companions.

Instead, another plan slowly came into his mind.

Without the knowledge of his French friends, he secretly enlisted the aid of five other crusaders

HIDDEN IN TIME

with whom he was acquainted. Leading them into the depths of the city in the middle of the night while his Templar colleagues slept, de Payns retraced his earlier steps from days before.

He led his small band by a different route into the tunnel outside the city gate. After several hours, at last they succeeded in breaking through the obstructions that had previously barred his way.

Climbing over stones and through rubble, they entered a maze of narrow passageways connecting several sections of tombs. The crusaders glanced about with trepidation. Many of the graves carved in walls of rock had already been put to use. But de Payns was not spooked by bones or rotting burial cloths.

He did his best to keep track of the twisting directions of their steps. An inner sense told him he was on the verge of a startling discovery. He would attempt a drawing of this burial maze when he returned to his quarters.

Suddenly he felt uncomfortable rumblings beneath his feet.

He paused and glanced back at his companions. Their wide eyes in the dim light of the two oil lamps showed they had felt it too. This was not the first occasion when the earth had shaken this region in violation of sacred decree.

De Payns gestured for them to follow and continued on. A minor tremor, he thought to himself. He had come too far to turn back now.

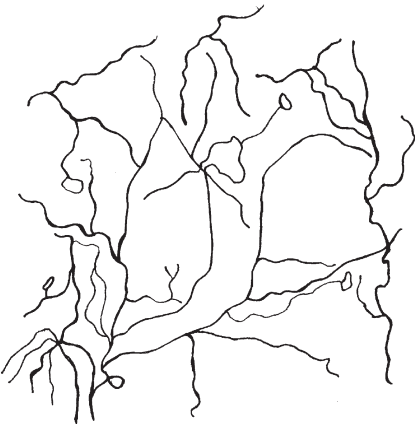
Ahead appeared a conflux of several passages, one to the left, another angling right at about thirty degrees, and another slanting sharply backward, nearly paralleling that by which they had come.

He stopped again, signalled for a lantern, then gazed into each of the three tunnels to see which might present itself as the logical course to follow.

Again the ground shook, more violently this time. An involuntary cry or two escaped several of the men's lips. Dust and a few pebbles fell onto their heads.

Still their leader remained unfazed. He continued to examine their surroundings.

Another jolt rocked beneath them. Then, at de Payns' side between the two angled passages, several rocks of the wall gave way and crumbled and fell at his feet. He leapt out of the way as his companions scrambled back.



"Wait . . . come back," cried de Payns. He now held one of the lanterns and examined the portion of wall that had shaken loose. He saw what appeared a rectangular outline.

"The tunnel is secure," he said. "We are safe enough. It is only a few stones from the wall that were dislodged."

As he spoke, he began poking about, knocking away more loose stones. Suddenly his hand shot through an opening and he heard a thud of falling stones in some unseen chamber behind the wall. De Payns quickly handed the lantern to another and began knocking and pushing at more loose stones.

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

"It looks like a vault, perhaps a crypt sealed up behind this wall," he shouted. "The quake loosened the stones. It opens off the main passage. Help me remove these rocks."

Within five minutes the former doorway was sufficiently broken apart. De Payns climbed into the opening, then reached back through it for a lantern.

One by one the others followed.



Thirty minutes later, they stood in awe and disbelief. They had found that which no man had laid eyes on in more than seventeen centuries. The acacia poles were still intact and strong enough for transport.

The six lifted their burden and squeezed their way toward the entry of the small chamber in which the unknown ancients had left the sacred box for repose.

The discovery had been made in a tiny cell down a long corridor from the main crypt into which the broken doorway had opened.

They managed to get it aloft, though there was barely enough space to press together and move out of the chamber where it had rested in darkness for so long.

"Careful," said de Payns. "Do not lay a finger on it. I must let go a moment to take the two lanterns ahead in the corridor. Hold this side steady."

He picked up first one, then the other lantern from the floor.

"Watch out!" cried a voice behind him.

"I've got it," replied another.

"Do not let the poles droop," said de Payns. "Keep them level until I rejoin you."

He walked along the corridor, set the lanterns down some distance away, then turned back to rejoin the others.

Another shout reverberated off the enclosing walls.

"I told you . . . look out—you fool, don't—"

"It's slipping!" cried another. "I can't hold—"

A shriek sounded the likes of which none who heard it would ever forget. Even as its other-worldly echo died away, he who made it collapsed in a heap on the floor of the passage.

Dread hung in the air. The four remaining, two on each side, struggled to steady the heavier weight.

De Payns grabbed one of the lanterns again and hurried to the scene.

He stooped beside the remaining four and extended a lamp toward the body.

The flickering light cast upon their fallen comrade revealed the answer to his question. That he was dead was obvious from one glance into his face. What he had beheld in the final instant before death de Payns did not know. But it was assuredly not from this world. In terror, none spoke for long seconds.

"Now you know to heed my warnings," said de Payns somberly as he stood. He himself was shaken more than he dared reveal. "I think it best we keep the weight evenly distributed on the two sides," he added. "I will hold the lantern so that no one else loses their balance. Bring it through—"

HIDDEN IN TIME

Again the ground shook. It was soon obvious that what had come before was but a precursor to this most severe quake. The entire city rumbled above them.

De Payns leapt back. The weighty treasure swayed dangerously on the shoulders of the four. But the way was too narrow and they had no means of escape, nor room to ease it back to the ground. One stumbled on the body of their dead companion. The ground was moving violently. The passage filled with falling rock and debris. The box tipped. A hand or two tried to steady the poles, but with the quake it was no use.

Muffled shouts and exclamations were followed by another scream, then a great crash. Rocks tumbled from the ceiling and fell everywhere. De Payns saw his crusader companions being buried in the very crypt in which they had discovered the treasure. But he could do nothing to save them.

Suddenly a fierce light burst into the passage. Brighter than the sun itself, it reflected off the gold even as their discovery disappeared in falling dust and stone.

De Payns cried in terror and pain. Both hands shot to his eyes against the blinding rays. The lantern crashed to the ground. The light seared his tongue as if with a hot iron of muting fire.

A great roar rang in the ears of his soul, whether with audible words or with an intuitive sense of apprehension, Hughes de Payns could never say. However it came to him, he knew the meaning of the words spoken out of the Light.

"In my time . . .," rumbled the Voice of Light. "In MY TIME!"

Gradually the foundations of Jerusalem stilled.

The echo of earthquake and voice, and the brilliance of light, all faded into silence and darkness.

Trembling in panicked horror, de Payns knelt to the ground, thinking again of the lantern. He could see nothing. Only blackness. A more terrifying blackness than he had ever imagined.

When his groping hands finally touched it, no flame met his finger. Already he suspected the darkness deeper than the mere absence of candle flame.

De Payns regained his feet and began feeling about. He took a few steps. How could he hope to find his way? Would he ever see daylight again?

He remembered the expression he had seen on the face of the dead man earlier. It was a look that would haunt him the rest of his days. That which had been hidden in time had been sealed off yet again, its would-be discoverers with it. He alone possessed the secret of both men and sacred repository.

Whatever he may have come to Jerusalem to find, Hughes de Payns wanted no part of it now!

Trembling, he fled in the darkness. Through the tunnels he stumbled and ran like a crazed wild man, frantic and without sense of direction, hands outstretched, attempting to feel his way, bumping and colliding into walls and protruding stones.

He was buried alive under Jerusalem, but knew not where. If there existed a way out after the quake, only a miracle would lead him through it.

PART ONE

LONDON



*How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.*

I thought you would call me "Father" and not turn away from following me.

*But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,
so you have been unfaithful to me.*

JEREMIAH 3:19-20



Hidden Mystery of the Ages

(1)

Two eyes squinted through powerful binoculars.

“Still clear,” their owner whispered. The female voice, however, betrayed anxiety.

Silence.

Two hundred yards away, a tall man, athletic of build, dressed entirely in black to match his face, crept along a stone wall in the darkness. He surveilled the same building. Though not meant for him, through a tiny speaker in his ear he also heard the words just spoken. No movement or sound came through the shadowy night.

Inside the edifice at the center of their attention, a third figure moved noiselessly through a maze of stone corridors. Surrounded by an iron railing and high fences, this structure was the centerpiece of a complex and highly secretive venture. It sat in the midst of what appeared a military compound. The gray granite block exterior was of recent construction, square and uninspired design, and from the center of its roof rose a green copper dome.

Everything culminated on this night here in the village of Aksum in the northern Ethiopian highlands.

At grave risk to his life, the daring adventurer had gained entrance to the Sanctuary from the roof. His reputation had been built with pick and shovel, digging back into the antiquity of human history. This night’s exploration, however, had been affected not by holes bored through rock but rather through skylights, ventilation systems, and an elevator shaft.

It was the most ambitious quest of his life. If he were successful in at last laying eyes on this prize, he would henceforth be known as no mere archaeologist but as the greatest antiquarian of all time.

Beside the towers of Aksum’s famous church, St. Mary’s of Zion, the stone repository in which he crept had been built only three and a half decades

HIDDEN IN TIME

earlier as permanent home for the sought-after, mysterious, and powerful wonder of the ancient world.

The building whose security the daredevil had cracked was called the Sanctuary of the Ark. His research confirmed that within its thick walls rested the ark of the covenant of the Hebrews.

The sacred relic had been lost to history since its disappearance from the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, sometime approximately nine hundred or a thousand years before Christ. On this night he hoped at last to uncover evidence to solve once and for all the mystery of its location.

If he or his lookouts were discovered, however, any monk of the church or citizen of the town would not hesitate to kill them. They protected these holy precincts against sacrilege with vigor.

Nor were they opposed to bringing bullets to aid in such duty.

(2)

The guardian monk, whose lifetime responsibility was to preside over the Sanctuary, awoke. It was the middle of the night.

He was the only human allowed in the Holy Place of the chapel where the ark was kept. In his solitary chamber a presence disturbed his slumber.

It took but seconds for him to gather his wits. He rose instantly and made his way across the floor. His bare feet made not a sound.

Deep within the granite complex the adventurer did not realize he was no longer alone. Even had he known, he would not have turned back.

He was too close!

Before him, in the center of the room, atop a waist-high table of carved stone, sat . . . *something* . . . an object . . . a mysterious shape.

His tiny flashlight was hardly capable of illuminating the whole. Draped over with embroidered cloth, about it clung the heavy scent of incense. The covering appeared faded blue. White and purple designs were sewn into it. Tattered fringe bordered the bottom.

The uninvited guest to the sacred chamber shone the beam back and forth. As he walked forward, he thought of the passage from Numbers 4 he knew from memory: "When the camp is to move . . . take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the Testimony with it. Then . . . spread a cloth of solid blue over that. . . ."

The rectangular shape in front of him appeared approximately three and a half feet from end to end, and a little over two feet high and deep. The cloth draped over its top, however, was raised higher toward both ends, as if covering two pointed protrusions.

Wings . . . the shape of the angels' wings!

Heart beating wildly, he paused before the cloaked object, then stretched

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

out his hand. Was he about to make known to the world the hidden mystery of the ages?

He took hold of one end of the fabric near its fringed edge. Just uncover it and snap a quick roll of photographs and the mystery would be solved!

Slowly he began to lift it up and back.

An inexplicable compulsion arrested his motion. The moral dilemma at the root of this enterprise, that he had broken into a church like a thief, suddenly entered the brain of his newly growing spiritual consciousness.

But he did not have leisure to consider the implications further.

(3)

Outside, the glare of two automobile headlamps lit the blackness of the streets about half a mile away.

The binoculars observing the silent building immediately turned toward the light and refocused.

“Scott . . . Scott, do you see that?”

“No. Still clear down here,” replied the lookout at the wall of St. Mary’s.
“What is it?”

“A car—coming this way.”

“Speed?”

“Fast.”

“I hear it. Adam,” he said into the tiny microphone next to his mouth, “we may have company.”

Again silence fell. The sound of the automobile’s engine could be heard through the night.

“Adam, did you hear me?”

“I copy,” returned a whispered voice.

“The car is moving this way,” came the woman’s voice again. “Adam, get out of there!”

“I can’t. I’ve just about—”

“Juliet’s right, Adam,” interrupted the archaeologist’s assistant. “We’re not alone. There’s another car speeding from the opposite direction now. Break it off!”

“I’ve got to at least get a pic—”

“Adam,” cried Juliet, “please!”

“I have to move!” said Scott. “My position’s compromised—gotta go!”

The screech of tires ended further communication. A powerful searchlight from one of the car’s windows probed the adjacent street and walls. Scott fell to his stomach. The beam passed over him by inches.

“Adam . . . hurry!” repeated Juliet as loud as she dared. Her own vantage point was safe. But she was terrified for the others. This was her first time out

HIDDEN IN TIME

in the field with the team on a project she had been in on from the beginning. Now she wasn't sure she liked this new line of work!

"I heard," came back the voice in her ear. "I'm on my way!"

(4)

A second automobile raced to the scene and skidded to a stop.

Immediately it emptied of six Ethiopian soldiers. They fanned out around the grounds of St. Mary's and the Sanctuary, automatic rifles ready to fire first and make inquiries later.

Inside, the robed and bearded guardian entered the chapel, candle in hand. He glanced about. He saw and heard nothing. Everything seemed in order. The odd-shaped tabotat, nearly uncovered only seconds earlier, sat where it had rested unmoved since construction of the Sanctuary.

Far above in the upper portions of the building, the intruder whose presence had awakened guardian, soldiers, and perhaps the power of the ark itself, scrambled hastily through the same vent by which he had gained access. As carefully guarded as was official access to information concerning this place, security for the building itself was noticeably low-tech. Getting in and out had been, not exactly a piece of cake, but a relatively uncomplicated matter for one with the right contacts and know-how.

And one with daring to go along with sophisticated gadgetry.

Two minutes later he emerged onto the roof under the cover of night. He saw his danger well enough. Below him, Sanctuary and church swarmed with soldiers and monks. However they had been alerted, they had wasted no time getting here. Lights flashed about and panned corners, side streets, and alleyways.

Escape would require even more pluck than the flight in. The roof wasn't high enough to give much maneuverability. There was but a slight breeze. He would have to hit it just right. Or else crash straight down into the search party below!

"I hope you made it out of there, Scott!" he said to himself. "But I'm not waiting around to find out!"

No time to strap himself. He'd hang on to the aluminum bar for dear life. He might have to let go before he reached the ground anyway.

He hoisted to his shoulders the custom-made lightweight hang glider by which he had arrived onto the roof an hour earlier. If only he could get some distance away before one of those spotlights from below accidentally panned upward through the sky!

He tested the direction of the wind one last time. He turned into the faint current, then sprinted toward the edge of the building.

With a downward dip, he glided away from the wall and into invisibility.

Shouts, running, and lights below remained focused in the two dimensions

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

of earth's plane. As they scanned and probed doors and windows and fences and streets, none felt the sweep of a great black wing soar past them overhead.

(5)

Eight or nine hundred yards away, beyond several high fences and alongside a run-down row of dwellings whose occupants all slept, another automobile sat next to an empty town square, its lights turned off, its engine silent.

Beside the car stood a diminutive young woman. Her long blonde hair was conspicuously out of place in this region of the world. She had tucked it up under a canvas hat of the African safari type so as to attract no attention.

Nervously she glanced about for her companions.

She had seen and heard the activity in the distance. Something must have gone wrong.

Behind her, footsteps ran up.

"Scott!" she exclaimed, spinning around. "Am I glad to see you. What happened?"

"Don't know. All of a sudden Juliet saw lights. She barely had time to warn us. I just got away."

"Is Adam . . . ?"

"Don't know that either. I took off. I didn't have the luxury of his means of transport. I had fences to climb!"

"And Juliet?"

"She'll be fine. She was near enough the hotel to walk back without being caught in the commotion."

Both glanced about. They were thinking the same thing—how long should they wait before giving thought to their own safety? The soldiers would no doubt soon widen their search.

Jen Swaner, the blonde Swede, and Scott Jordan, the black American, continued to probe the night for the Englishman who was their leader. No sound could be heard other than an occasional shout from the direction of the church.

Two or three minutes passed.

A great winged rush swept overhead.

They spun around and looked up as Adam Livingstone's feet landed at a run several yards away. They hurried toward him with quiet exclamations and greetings.

"I don't believe you made it this far!" said Scott. "How did you do it?"

"I hit a little updraft as I sailed over those fellows' heads," said Adam, grinning. "Help me get this thing dismantled and folded up."

"Leave it. Let's get out of here."

"I invested too much in this design to scrap it. Besides," Adam added, "after

HIDDEN IN TIME

what I saw in there, nothing's going to keep me from coming back! Drat, I wish I'd pulled the camera out sooner and hadn't wasted so much time! Jen, get the motor going."

Jen ran for the car and jumped behind the wheel.

Scott and Adam stuffed the collapsed glider into the trunk. The tall men squeezed into the tiny rented Toyota. Jen shifted the car into gear. As carefully as she dared, Swaner sped toward the hotel where Adam's team, not to mention his fiancée, Juliet Halsay, was booked.

This trio had been together on some daring escapades. But if they got through tonight in one piece and safely out of Aksum, this might prove their closest brush yet.

"Given the hornet's nest we aroused," said Adam as they approached the hotel a few minutes later along a side street, "I think we ought to retrieve Figg and Crystal immediately. Where's Juliet?"

"On her way back to the hotel."

"Good. We need to head south in both cars tonight. I have the feeling they'll be searching every accommodation for miles by morning. I'm not sure it would be healthy for us to hang around."