

11 Castle Rock

In the short chill of dawn the four boys gathered round the black smudge where the fire had been, while Ralph knelt and blew. Grey, feathery ashes scurried hither and thither at his breath but no spark shone among them. The twins watched anxiously and Piggy sat expressionless behind the luminous wall of his myopia. Ralph continued to blow till his ears were singing with the effort, but then the first breeze of dawn took the job off his hands and blinded him with ashes. He squatted back, swore, and rubbed water out of his eyes.

“No use.”

Eric looked down at him through a mask of dried blood. Piggy peered in the general direction of Ralph.

“ ’Course it’s no use, Ralph. Now we got no fire.”

Ralph brought his face within a couple of feet of Piggy’s.

“Can you see me?”

“A bit.”

Ralph allowed the swollen flap of his cheek to close his eye again.

“They’ve got our fire.”

Rage shrilled his voice.

“They stole it!”

“That’s them,” said Piggy. “They blinded me. See? That’s Jack Merridew. You call an assembly, Ralph, we got to decide what to do.”

“An assembly for only us?”

“It’s all we got. Sam – let me hold on to you.”

They went toward the platform.

“Blow the conch,” said Piggy. “Blow as loud as you can.”

The forests re-echoed; and birds lifted, crying out of the treetops, as on that first morning ages ago. Both ways the beach was deserted. Some littluns came from the shelters. Ralph sat down on the polished trunk

and the three others stood before him. He nodded, and Samneric sat down on the right. Ralph pushed the conch into Piggy's hands. He held the shining thing carefully and blinked at Ralph.

"Go on, then."

"I just take the conch to say this. I can't see no more and I got to get my glasses back. Awful things has been done on this island. I voted for you for chief. He's the only one who ever got anything done. So now you speak, Ralph, and tell us what. Or else –"

Piggy broke off, sniveling. Ralph took back the conch as he sat down.

"Just an ordinary fire. You'd think we could do that, wouldn't you? Just a smoke signal so we can be rescued. Are we savages or what? Only now there's no signal going up. Ships may be passing. Do you remember how he went hunting and the fire went out and a ship passed by? And they all think he's best as chief. Then there was, there was . . . that's his fault, too. If it hadn't been for him it would never have happened. Now Piggy can't see, and they came, stealing –" Ralph's voice ran up "– at night, in darkness, and stole our fire. They stole it. We'd have given them fire if they'd asked. But they stole it and the signal's out and we can't ever be rescued. Don't you see what I mean? We'd have given them fire for themselves only they stole it. I –"

He paused lamely as the curtain flickered in his brain. Piggy held out his hands for the conch.

"What you goin' to do, Ralph? This is jus' talk without deciding. I want my glasses."

"I'm trying to think. Supposing we go, looking like we used to, washed and hair brushed – after all we aren't savages really and being rescued isn't a game –"

He opened the flap of his cheek and looked at the twins.

"We could smarten up a bit and then go –"

"We ought to take spears," said Sam. "Even Piggy."

"– because we may need them."

“You haven’t got the conch!”

Piggy held up the shell.

“You can take spears if you want but I shan’t. What’s the good? I’ll have to be led like a dog, anyhow. Yes, laugh. Go on, laugh. There’s them on this island as would laugh at anything. And what happened? What’s grownups goin’ to think? Young Simon was murdered. And there was that other kid what had a mark on his face. Who’s seen him since we first come here?”

“Piggy! Stop a minute!”

“I got the conch. I’m going to that Jack Merridew an’ tell him, I am.”

“You’ll get hurt.”

“What can he do more than he has? I’ll tell him what’s what. You let me carry the conch, Ralph. I’ll show him the one thing he hasn’t got.”

Piggy paused for a moment and peered round at the dim figures. The shape of the old assembly, trodden in the grass, listened to him.

“I’m going to him with this conch in my hands. I’m going to hold it out. Look, I’m goin’ to say, you’re stronger than I am and you haven’t got asthma. You can see, I’m goin’ to say, and with both eyes. But I don’t ask for my glasses back, not as a favor. I don’t ask you to be a sport, I’ll say, not because you’re strong, but because what’s right’s right. Give me my glasses, I’m going to say – you got to!”

Piggy ended, flushed and trembling. He pushed the conch quickly into Ralph’s hands as though in a hurry to be rid of it and wiped the tears from his eyes. The green light was gentle about them and the conch lay at Ralph’s feet, fragile and white. A single drop of water that had escaped Piggy’s fingers now flashed on the delicate curve like a star.

At last Ralph sat up straight and drew back his hair.

“All right. I mean – you can try if you like. We’ll go with you.”

“He’ll be painted,” said Sam, timidly. “You know how he’ll be – ”

“ – he won’t think much of us – ”

“ – if he gets waxy we’ve had it – ”

Ralph scowled at Sam. Dimly he remembered something Simon had said to him once, by the rocks.

“Don’t be silly,” he said. And then he added quickly, “Let’s go.”

He held out the conch to Piggy who flushed, this time with pride.

“You must carry it.”

“When we’re ready I’ll carry it – ”

Piggy sought in his mind for words to convey his passionate willingness to carry the conch against all odds.

“I don’t mind. I’ll be glad, Ralph, only I’ll have to be led.”

Ralph put the conch back on the shining log.

“We better eat and then get ready.”

They made their way to the devastated fruit trees. Piggy was helped to his food and found some by touch. While they ate, Ralph thought of the afternoon.

“We’ll be like we were. We’ll wash – ”

Sam gulped down a mouthful and protested.

“But we bathe every day!”

Ralph looked at the filthy objects before him and sighed.

“We ought to comb our hair. Only it’s too long.”

“I’ve got both socks left in the shelter,” said Eric, “so we could pull them over our heads like caps, sort of.”

“We could find some stuff,” said Piggy, “and tie your hair back.”

“Like a girl!”

“No. ‘Course not.”

“Then we must go as we are,” said Ralph, “and they won’t be any better.”

Eric made a detaining gesture.

“But they’ll be painted! You know how it is.” The others nodded. They understood only too well the liberation into savagery that the concealing paint brought.

“Well, we won’t be painted,” said Ralph, “because we aren’t savages.”

Samneric looked at each other.

“All the same – ”

Ralph shouted.

“No paint!”

He tried to remember.

“Smoke,” he said, “we want smoke.”

He turned on the twins fiercely.

“I said ‘smoke’! We’ve got to have smoke.”

There was silence, except for the multitudinous murmur of the bees. As last Piggy spoke, kindly.

“ ‘Course we have. ‘Cos the smoke’s a signal and we can’t be rescued if we don’t have smoke.”

“I knew that!” shouted Ralph. He pulled his arm away from Piggy. “Are you suggesting – ?”

“I’m jus’ saying what you always say,” said Piggy hastily. “I’d thought for a moment – ”

“I hadn’t,” said Ralph loudly. “I knew it all the time. I hadn’t forgotten.”

Piggy nodded propitiatingly.

“You’re chief, Ralph. You remember everything.”

“I hadn’t forgotten.”

“ ‘Course not.”

The twins were examining Ralph curiously, as though they were seeing him for the first time.

They set off along the beach in formation. Ralph went first, limping a little, his spear carried over one shoulder. He saw things partially, through the tremble of the heat haze over the flashing sands, and his own long hair and injuries. Behind him came the twins, worried now for a while but full of unquenchable vitality. They said little but trailed the butts of their wooden spears; for Piggy had found that, by looking down and shielding his tired sight from the sun, he could just see these moving along the sand. He walked between the trailing butts, therefore, the conch held carefully between his two hands. The boys made a compact little group that moved over the beach, four plate-like shadows dancing and mingling beneath them. There was no sign left of the storm, and the beach was swept clean like a blade that has been scoured. The sky and the mountain were at an immense distance, shimmering in the heat; and the reef was lifted by mirage, floating in a kind of silver pool halfway up the sky.

They passed the place where the tribe had danced. The charred sticks still lay on the rocks where the rain had quenched them but the sand by the water was smooth again. They passed this in silence. No one doubted that the tribe would be found at the Castle Rock and when they came in sight of it they stopped with one accord. The densest tangle on the island, a mass of twisted stems, black and green and impenetrable, lay on their left and tall grass swayed before them. Now Ralph went forward.

Here was the crushed grass where they had all lain when he had gone to prospect. There was the neck of land, the ledge skirting the rock, up there were the red pinnacles.

Sam touched his arm.

“Smoke.”

There was a tiny smudge of smoke wavering into the air on the other side of the rock.

“Some fire – I don’t think.”

Ralph turned.

“What are we hiding for?”

He stepped through the screen of grass on to the little open space that led to the narrow neck.

“You two follow behind. I’ll go first, then Piggy a pace behind me. Keep your spears ready.”

Piggy peered anxiously into the luminous veil that hung between him and the world.

“Is it safe? Ain’t there a cliff? I can hear the sea.”

“You keep right close to me.”

Ralph moved forward on to the neck. He kicked a stone and it bounded into the water. Then the sea sucked down, revealing a red, weedy square forty feet beneath Ralph’s left arm.

“Am I safe?” quavered Piggy. “I feel awful – ”

High above them from the pinnacles came a sudden shout and then an imitation war-cry that was answered by a dozen voices from behind the rock.

“Give me the conch and stay still.”

“Halt! Who goes there?”

Ralph bent back his head and glimpsed Roger’s dark face at the top.

“You can see who I am!” he shouted. “Stop being silly!”

He put the conch to his lips and began to blow. Savages appeared, painted out of recognition, edging round the ledge toward the neck. They carried spears and disposed themselves to defend the entrance. Ralph went on blowing and ignored Piggy’s terrors.

Roger was shouting.

“You mind out – see?”

At length Ralph took his lips away and paused to get his breath back. His first words were a gasp, but audible.

“ – calling an assembly.”

The savages guarding the neck muttered among themselves but made no motion. Ralph walked forwards a couple of steps. A voice whispered urgently behind him.

“Don’t leave me, Ralph.”

“You kneel down,” said Ralph sideways, “and wait till I come back.”

He stood halfway along the neck and gazed at the savages intently. Freed by the paint, they had tied their hair back and were more comfortable than he was. Ralph made a resolution to tie his own back afterwards. Indeed he felt like telling them to wait and doing it there and then; but that was impossible. The savages sniggered a bit and one gestured at Ralph with his spear. High above, Roger took his hands off the lever and leaned out to see what was going on. The boys on the neck stood in a pool of their own shadow, diminished to shaggy heads. Piggy crouched, his back shapeless as a sack.

“I’m calling an assembly.”

Silence.

Roger took up a small stone and flung it between the twins, aiming to miss. They started and Sam only just kept his footing. Some source of power began to pulse in Roger’s body.

Ralph spoke again, loudly.

“I’m calling an assembly.”

He ran his eye over them.

“Where’s Jack?”

The group of boys stirred and consulted. A painted face spoke with the voice of Robert.

“He’s hunting. And he said we weren’t to let you in.”

“I’ve come to see about the fire,” said Ralph, “and about Piggy’s specs.”

The group in front of him shifted and laughter shivered outwards from among them, light, excited laughter that went echoing among the tall rocks.

A voice spoke from behind Ralph.

“What do you want?”

The twins made a bolt past Ralph and got between him and the entry. He turned quickly. Jack, identifiable by personality and red hair, was advancing from the forest. A hunter crouched on either side. All three were masked in black and green. Behind them on the grass the headless and paunched body of a sow lay where they had dropped it.

Piggy wailed.

“Ralph! Don’t leave me!”

With ludicrous care he embraced the rock, pressing himself to it above the sucking sea. The sniggering of the savages became a loud derisive jeer.

Jack shouted above the noise.

“You go away, Ralph. You keep to your end. This is my end and my tribe. You leave me alone.”

The jeering died away.

“You pinched Piggy’s specs,” said Ralph, breathlessly. “You’ve got to give them back.”

“Got to? Who says?”

Ralph’s temper blazed out.

“I say! You voted for me for chief. Didn’t you hear the conch? You played a dirty trick – we’d have given you fire if you’d asked for it – ”

The blood was flowing in his cheeks and the bunged-up eye throbbed.

“You could have had fire whenever you wanted. But you didn’t. You came sneaking up like a thief and stole Piggy’s glasses!”

“Say that again!”

“Thief! Thief!”

Piggy screamed.

“Ralph! Mind me!”

Jack made a rush and stabbed at Ralph’s chest with his spear. Ralph sensed the position of the weapon from the glimpse he caught of Jack’s arm and put the thrust aside with his own butt. Then he brought the end round and caught Jack a stinger across the ear. They were chest to chest, breathing fiercely, pushing and glaring.

“Who’s a thief?”

“You are!”

Jack wrenched free and swung at Ralph with his spear. By common consent they were using the spears as sabers now, no longer daring the lethal points. The blow struck Ralph’s spear and slid down, to fall agonizingly on his fingers. Then they were apart once more, their positions reversed, Jack toward the Castle Rock and Ralph on the outside toward the island.

Both boys were breathing very heavily.

“Come on then – ”

“Come on – ”

Truculently they squared up to each other but kept just out of fighting distance.

“You come on and see what you get!”

“You come on – ”

Piggy clutching the ground was trying to attract Ralph’s attention. Ralph moved, bent down, kept a wary eye on Jack.

“Ralph – remember what we came for. The fire. My specs.”

Ralph nodded. He relaxed his fighting muscles, stood easily and grounded the butt of his spear. Jack watched him inscrutably through his paint. Ralph glanced up at the pinnacles, then toward the group of savages.

“Listen. We’ve come to say this. First you’ve got to give back Piggy’s specs. If he hasn’t got them he can’t see. You aren’t playing the game – ”

The tribe of painted savages giggled and Ralph’s mind faltered. He pushed his hair up and gazed at the green and black mask before him, trying to remember what Jack looked like.

Piggy whispered.

“And the fire.”

“Oh yes. Then about the fire. I say this again. I’ve been saying it ever since we dropped in.”

He held out his spear and pointed at the savages. “Your only hope is keeping a signal fire going as long as there’s light to see. Then maybe a ship’ll notice the smoke and come and rescue us and take us home. But without that smoke we’ve got to wait till some ship comes by accident. We might wait years; till we were old – ”

The shivering, silvery, unreal laughter of the savages sprayed out and echoed away. A gust of rage shook Ralph. His voice cracked.

“Don’t you understand, you painted fools? Sam, Eric, Piggy and me – we aren’t enough. We tried to keep the fire going, but we couldn’t. And then you, playing at hunting. . . .”

He pointed past them to where the trickle of smoke dispersed in the pearly air.

“Look at that! Call that a signal fire? That’s a cooking fire. Now you’ll eat and there’ll be no smoke. Don’t you understand? There may be a ship out there – ”

He paused, defeated by the silence and the painted anonymity of the group guarding the entry. Jack opened a pink mouth and addressed Samneric, who were between him and his tribe.

“You two. Get back.”

No one answered him. The twins, puzzled, looked at each other; while Piggy, reassured by the cessation of violence, stood up carefully. Jack glanced back at Ralph and then at the twins.

“Grab them!”

No one moved. Jack shouted angrily.

“I said ‘grab them’!”

The painted group moved round Samneric nervously and unhandily. Once more the silvery laughter scattered.

Samneric protested out of the heart of civilization.

“Oh, I say!”

“ – honestly!”

Their spears were taken from them.

“Tie them up!”

Ralph cried out hopelessly against the black and green mask.

“Jack!”

“Go on. Tie them.”

Now the painted group felt the otherness of Samneric, felt the power in their own hands. They felled the twins clumsily and excitedly. Jack was inspired. He knew that Ralph would attempt a rescue. He struck in a humming circle behind him and Ralph only just parried the blow. Beyond them the tribe and the twins were a loud and writhing heap. Piggy crouched again. Then the twins lay, astonished, and the tribe stood round them. Jack turned to Ralph and spoke between his teeth.

“See? They do what I want.”

There was silence again. The twins lay, inexpertly tied up, and the tribe watched Ralph to see what he would do. He numbered them through his fringe, glimpsed the ineffectual smoke.

His temper broke. He screamed at Jack.

“You’re a beast and a swine and a bloody, bloody thief!”

He charged.

Jack, knowing this was the crisis, charged too. They met with a jolt and bounced apart. Jack swung with his fist at Ralph and caught him on the ear. Ralph hit Jack in the stomach and made him grunt. Then they were facing each other again, panting and furious, but unnerved by each other's ferocity. They became aware of the noise that was the background to this fight, the steady shrill cheering of the tribe behind them.

Piggy's voice penetrated to Ralph.

"Let me speak."

He was standing in the dust of the fight, and as the tribe saw his intention the shrill cheer changed to a steady booing.

Piggy held up the conch and the booing sagged a little, then came up again to strength.

"I got the conch!"

He shouted.

"I tell you, I got the conch!"

Surprisingly, there was silence now; the tribe were curious to hear what amusing thing he might have to say.

Silence and pause; but in the silence a curious air-noise, close by Ralph's head. He gave it half his attention – and there it was again; a faint "Zup!" Someone was throwing stones: Roger was dropping them, his one hand still on the lever. Below him, Ralph was a shock of hair and Piggy a bag of fat.

"I got this to say. You're acting like a crowd of kids." The booing rose and died again as Piggy lifted the white, magic shell.

"Which is better – to be a pack of painted Indians like you are, or to be sensible like Ralph is?"

A great clamor rose among the savages. Piggy shouted again.

"Which is better – to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill?"

Again the clamor and again – "Zup!"

Ralph shouted against the noise.

“Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?”

Now Jack was yelling too and Ralph could no longer make himself heard. Jack had backed right against the tribe and they were a solid mass of menace that bristled with spears. The intention of a charge was forming among them; they were working up to it and the neck would be swept clear. Ralph stood facing them, a little to one side, his spear ready. By him stood Piggy still holding out the talisman, the fragile, shining beauty of the shell. The storm of sound beat at them, an incantation of hatred. High overhead, Roger, with a sense of delirious abandonment, leaned all his weight on the lever.

Ralph heard the great rock before he saw it. He was aware of a jolt in the earth that came to him through the soles of his feet, and the breaking sound of stones at the top of the cliff. Then the monstrous red thing bounded across the neck and he flung himself flat while the tribe shrieked.

The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt, traveled through the air sideways from the rock, turning over as he went. The rock bounded twice and was lost in the forest. Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed. Then the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone.

This time the silence was complete. Ralph's lips formed a word but no sound came.

Suddenly Jack bounded out from the tribe and began screaming wildly.

“See? See? That's what you'll get! I meant that! There isn't a tribe for you any more! The conch is gone –”

He ran forward, stooping.

“I’m chief!”

Viciously, with full intention, he hurled his spear at Ralph. The point tore the skin and flesh over Ralph’s ribs, then sheared off and fell in the water. Ralph stumbled, feeling not pain but panic, and the tribe, screaming now like the chief, began to advance. Another spear, a bent one that would not fly straight, went past his face and one fell from on high where Roger was. The twins lay hidden behind the tribe and the anonymous devils’ faces swarmed across the neck. Ralph turned and ran. A great noise as of sea gulls rose behind him. He obeyed an instinct that he did not know he possessed and swerved over the open space so that the spears went wide. He saw the headless body of the sow and jumped in time. Then he was crashing through foliage and small boughs and was hidden by the forest.

The chief stopped by the pig, turned and held up his hands.

“Back! Back to the fort!”

Presently the tribe returned noisily to the neck where Roger joined them.

The chief spoke to him angrily.

“Why aren’t you on watch?”

Roger looked at him gravely.

“I just came down – ”

The hangman’s horror clung round him. The chief said no more to him but looked down at Samneric.

“You got to join the tribe.”

“You lemme go – ”

“ – and me.”

The chief snatched one of the few spears that were left and poked Sam in the ribs.

“What d’you mean by it, eh?” said the chief fiercely. “What d’you mean by coming with spears? What d’you mean by not joining my tribe?”

The prodding became rhythmic. Sam yelled.

“That’s not the way.”

Roger edged past the chief, only just avoiding pushing him with his shoulder. The yelling ceased, and Samneric lay looking up in quiet terror. Roger advanced upon them as one wielding a nameless authority.