

5 Beast from Water

The tide was coming in and there was only a narrow strip of firm beach between the water and the white, stumbling stuff near the palm terrace. Ralph chose the firm strip as a path because he needed to think, and only here could he allow his feet to move without having to watch them. Suddenly, pacing by the water, he was overcome with astonishment. He found himself understanding the wearisomeness of this life, where every path was an improvisation and a considerable part of one's waking life was spent watching one's feet. He stopped, facing the strip; and remembering that first enthusiastic exploration as though it were part of a brighter childhood, he smiled jeeringly. He turned then and walked back toward the platform with the sun in his face. The time had come for the assembly and as he walked into the concealing splendors of the sunlight he went carefully over the points of his speech. There must be no mistake about this assembly, no chasing imaginary.

He lost himself in a maze of thoughts that were rendered vague by his lack of words to express them. Frowning, he tried again.

This meeting must not be fun, but business.

At that he walked faster, aware all at once of urgency and the declining sun and a little wind created by his speed that breathed about his face. This wind pressed his grey shirt against his chest so that he noticed – in this new mood of comprehension – how the folds were stiff like cardboard, and unpleasant; noticed too how the frayed edges of his shorts were making an uncomfortable, pink area on the front of his thighs. With a convulsion of the mind, Ralph discovered dirt and decay, understood how much he disliked perpetually flicking the tangled hair out of his eyes, and at last, when the sun was gone, rolling noisily to rest among dry leaves. At that he began to trot.

The beach near the bathing pool was dotted with groups of boys waiting for the assembly. They made way for him silently, conscious of his grim mood and the fault at the fire.

The place of assembly in which he stood was roughly a triangle; but irregular and sketchy, like everything they made. First there was the log

on which he himself sat; a dead tree that must have been quite exceptionally big for the platform. Perhaps one of those legendary storms of the Pacific had shifted it here. This palm trunk lay parallel to the beach, so that when Ralph sat he faced the island but to the boys was a darkish figure against the shimmer of the lagoon. The two sides of the triangle of which the log was base were less evenly defined. On the right was a log polished by restless seats along the top, but not so large as the chief's and not so comfortable. On the left were four small logs, one of them – the farthest – lamentably springy. Assembly after assembly had broken up in laughter when someone had leaned too far back and the log had whipped and thrown half a dozen boys backwards into the grass. Yet now, he saw, no one had had the wit – not himself nor Jack, nor Piggy – to bring a stone and wedge the thing. So they would continue enduring the ill-balanced twister, because, because.... Again he lost himself in deep waters.

Grass was worn away in front of each trunk but grew tall and untrodden in the center of the triangle. Then, at the apex, the grass was thick again because no one sat there. All round the place of assembly the grey trunks rose, straight or leaning, and supported the low roof of leaves. On two sides was the beach; behind, the lagoon; in front, the darkness of the island.

Ralph turned to the chief's seat. They had never had an assembly as late before. That was why the place looked so different. Normally the underside of the green roof was lit by a tangle of golden reflections, and their faces were lit upside down – like, thought Ralph, when you hold an electric torch in your hands. But now the sun was slanting in at one side, so that the shadows were where they ought to be.

Again he fell into that strange mood of speculation that was so foreign to him. If faces were different when lit from above or below – what was a face? What was anything?

Ralph moved impatiently. The trouble was, if you were a chief you had to think, you had to be wise. And then the occasion slipped by so that you had to grab at a decision. This made you think; because thought was a valuable thing, that got results.

Only, decided Ralph as he faced the chief's seat, I can't think. Not like Piggy.

Once more that evening Ralph had to adjust his values. Piggy could think. He could go step by step inside that fat head of his, only Piggy was no chief. But Piggy, for all his ludicrous body, had brains. Ralph was a specialist in thought now, and could recognize thought in another.

The sun in his eyes reminded him how time was passing, so he took the conch down from the tree and examined the surface. Exposure to the air had bleached the yellow and pink to near-white, and transparency. Ralph felt a kind of affectionate reverence for the conch, even though he had fished the thing out of the lagoon himself. He faced the place of assembly and put the conch to his lips.

The others were waiting for this and came straight away. Those who were aware that a ship had passed the island while the fire was out were subdued by the thought of Ralph's anger; while those, including the littluns who did not know, were impressed by the general air of solemnity. The place of assembly filled quickly; Jack, Simon, Maurice, most of the hunters, on Ralph's right; the rest on the left, under the sun. Piggy came and stood outside the triangle. This indicated that he wished to listen, but would not speak; and Piggy intended it as a gesture of disapproval.

"The thing is: we need an assembly."

No one said anything but the faces turned to Ralph were intent. He flourished the conch. He had learnt as a practical business that fundamental statements like this had to be said at least twice, before everyone understood them. One had to sit, attracting all eyes to the conch, and drop words like heavy round stones among the little groups that crouched or squatted. He was searching his mind for simple words so that even the littluns would understand what the assembly was about. Later perhaps, practised debaters – Jack, Maurice, Piggy – would use their whole art to twist the meeting; but now at the beginning the subject of the debate must be laid out clearly.

“We need an assembly. Not for fun. Not for laughing and falling off the log” – the group of littluns on the twister giggled and looked at each other – “not for making jokes, or for” – he lifted the conch in an effort to find the compelling word – “for cleverness. Not for these things. But to put things straight.”

He paused for a moment.

“I’ve been alone. By myself I went, thinking what’s what. I know what we need. An assembly to put things straight. And first of all, I’m speaking.”

He paused for a moment and automatically pushed back his hair. Piggy tiptoed to the triangle, his ineffectual protest made, and joined the others.

Ralph went on.

“We have lots of assemblies. Everybody enjoys speaking and being together. We decide things. But they don’t get done. We were going to have water brought from the stream and left in those coconut shells under fresh leaves. So it was, for a few days. Now there’s no water. The shells are dry. People drink from the river.”

There was a murmur of assent.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with drinking from the river. I mean I’d sooner have water from that place – you know, the pool where the waterfall is – than out of an old coconut shell. Only we said we’d have the water brought. And now not. There were only two full shells there this afternoon.”

He licked his lips.

“Then there’s huts. Shelters.”

The murmur swelled again and died away.

“You mostly sleep in shelters. Tonight, except for Samneric up by the fire, you’ll all sleep there. Who built the shelters?”

Clamor rose at once. Everyone had built the shelters. Ralph had to wave the conch once more.

“Wait a minute! I mean, who built all three? We all built the first one, four of us the second one, and me ’n Simon built the last one over there. That’s why it’s so tottery. No. Don’t laugh. That shelter might fall down if the rain comes back. We’ll need those shelters then.”

He paused and cleared his throat.

“There’s another thing. We chose those rocks right along beyond the bathing pool as a lavatory. That was sensible too. The tide cleans the place up. You littluns know about that.”

There were sniggers here and there and swift glances.

“Now people seem to use anywhere. Even near the shelters and the platform. You littluns, when you’re getting fruit; if you’re taken short –”

The assembly roared.

“I said if you’re taken short you keep away from the fruit. That’s dirty!” Laughter rose again.

“I said that’s dirty!”

He plucked at his stiff, grey shirt.

“That’s really dirty. If you’re taken short you go right along the beach to the rocks. See?”

Piggy held out his hands for the conch but Ralph shook his head. His speech was planned, point by point.

“We’ve all got to use the rocks again. This place is getting dirty.” He paused. The assembly, sensing a crisis, was tensely expectant. “And then: about the fire.”

Ralph let out his spare breath with a little gasp that was echoed by his audience. Jack started to chip a piece of wood with his knife and whispered something to Robert, who looked away.

“The fire is the most important thing on the island. How can we ever be rescued except by luck, if we don’t keep a fire going? Is a fire too much for us to make?”

He flung out an arm.

“Look at us! How many are we? And yet we can’t keep a fire going to make smoke. Don’t you understand? Can’t you see we ought to – ought to die before we let the fire out?”

There was a self-conscious giggling among the hunters. Ralph turned on them passionately.

“You hunters! You can laugh! But I tell you the smoke is more important than the pig, however often you kill one. Do all of you see?” He spread his arms wide and turned to the whole triangle.

“We’ve got to make smoke up there – or die.” He paused, feeling for his next point.

“And another thing.”

Someone called out.

“Too many things.”

There came a mutter of agreement. Ralph overrode them.

“And another thing. We nearly set the whole island on fire. And we waste time, rolling rocks, and making little cooking fires. Now I say this and make it a rule, because I’m chief. We won’t have a fire anywhere but on the mountain. Ever.”

There was a row immediately. Boys stood up and shouted and Ralph shouted back.

“Because if you want a fire to cook fish or crab, you can jolly well go up the mountain. That way we’ll be certain.”

Hands were reaching for the conch in the light of the setting sun. He held on and leapt on the trunk.

“All this I meant to say. Now I’ve said it. You voted me for chief. Now you do what I say.”

They quieted, slowly, and at last were seated again. Ralph dropped down and spoke in his ordinary voice.

“So remember. The rocks for a lavatory. Keep the fire going and smoke showing as a signal. Don’t take fire from the mountain. Take your food up there.”

Jack stood up, scowling in the gloom, and held out his hands. “I haven’t finished yet.”

“But you’ve talked and talked!”

“I’ve got the conch.”

Jack sat down, grumbling.

“Then the last thing. This is what people can talk about.”

He waited till the platform was very still.

“Things are breaking up. I don’t understand why. We began well; we were happy. And then – ”

He moved the conch gently, looking beyond them at nothing, remembering the beastie, the snake, the fire, the talk of fear. “Then people started getting frightened.”

A murmur, almost a moan, rose and passed away. Jack had stopped whittling. Ralph went on, abruptly.

“But that’s littluns’ talk. We’ll get that straight. So the last part, the bit we can all talk about, is kind of deciding on the fear.”

The hair was creeping into his eyes again.

“We’ve got to talk about this fear and decide there’s nothing in it. I’m frightened myself, sometimes; only that’s nonsense! Like bogies. Then, when we’ve decided, we can start again and be careful about things like the fire.” A picture of three boys walking along the bright beach flitted through his mind. “And be happy.”

Ceremonially, Ralph laid the conch on the trunk beside him as a sign that the speech was over. What sunlight reached them was level.

Jack stood up and took the conch.

“So this is a meeting to find out what’s what. I’ll tell you what’s what. You littluns started all this, with the fear talk. Beasts! Where from? Of course we’re frightened sometimes but we put up with being frightened. Only Ralph says you scream in the night. What does that mean but nightmares? Anyway, you don’t hunt or build or help –

you're a lot of cry-babies and sissies. That's what. And as for the fear – you'll have to put up with that like the rest of us.”

Ralph looked at Jack open-mouthed, but Jack took no notice.

“The thing is – fear can't hurt you any more than a dream. There aren't any beasts to be afraid of on this island.” He looked along the row of whispering littluns. “Serve you right if something did get you, you useless lot of cry-babies! But there is no animal – ”

Ralph interrupted him testily.

“What is all this? Who said anything about an animal?”

“You did, the other day. You said they dream and cry out. Now they talk – not only the littluns, but my hunters sometimes – talk of a thing, a dark thing, a beast, some sort of animal. I've heard. You thought not, didn't you? Now listen. You don't get big animals on small islands. Only pigs. You only get lions and tigers in big countries like Africa and India – ”

“And the Zoo – ”

“I've got the conch. I'm not talking about the fear. I'm talking about the beast. Be frightened if you like. But as for the beast – ”

Jack paused, cradling the conch, and turned to his hunters with their dirty black caps.

“Am I a hunter or am I not?”

They nodded, simply. He was a hunter all right. No one doubted that. “Well then – I've been all over this island. By myself. If there were a beast I'd have seen it. Be frightened because you're like that – but there is no beast in the forest.”

Jack handed back the conch and sat down. The whole assembly applauded him with relief. Then Piggy held out his hand.

“I don't agree with all Jack said, but with some. 'Course there isn't a beast in the forest. How could there be? What would a beast eat?”

“Pig.”

“We eat pig.”

“Piggy!”

“I got the conch!” said Piggy indignantly. “Ralph – they ought to shut up, oughtn’t they? You shut up, you littluns! What I mean is that I don’t agree about this here fear. Of course there isn’t nothing to be afraid of in the forest. Why – I been there myself! You’ll be talking about ghosts and such things next. We know what goes on and if there’s something wrong, there’s someone to put it right.”

He took off his glasses and blinked at them. The sun had gone as if the light had been turned off.

He proceeded to explain.

“If you get a pain in your stomach, whether it’s a little one or a big one – ”

“Yours is a big one.”

“When you done laughing perhaps we can get on with the meeting. And if them littluns climb back on the twister again they’ll only fall off in a sec. So they might as well sit on the ground and listen. No. You have doctors for everything, even the inside of your mind. You don’t really mean that we got to be frightened all the time of nothing? Life,” said Piggy expansively, “is scientific, that’s what it is. In a year or two when the war’s over they’ll be travelling to Mars and back. I know there isn’t no beast – not with claws and all that, I mean – but I know there isn’t no fear, either.”

Piggy paused. “Unless – ”

Ralph moved restlessly. “Unless what?”

“Unless we get frightened of people.”

A sound, half-laugh, half-jeer, rose among the seated boys. Piggy ducked his head and went on hastily.

“So let’s hear from that littlun who talked about a beast and perhaps we can show him how silly he is.”

The littluns began to jabber among themselves, then one stood forward.

“What’s your name?”

“Phil.”

For a littlun he was self-confident, holding out his hands, cradling the conch as Ralph did, looking round at them to collect their attention before he spoke.

“Last night I had a dream, a horrid dream, fighting with things. I was outside the shelter by myself, fighting with things, those twisty things in the trees.”

He paused, and the other littluns laughed in horrified sympathy.

“Then I was frightened and I woke up. And I was outside the shelter by myself in the dark and the twisty things had gone away.”

The vivid horror of this, so possible and so nakedly terrifying, held them all silent. The child’s voice went piping on from behind the white conch.

“And I was frightened and started to call out for Ralph and then I saw something moving among the trees, something big and horrid.”

He paused, half-frightened by the recollection yet proud of the sensation he was creating.

“That was a nightmare,” said Ralph. “He was walking in his sleep.” The assembly murmured in subdued agreement.

The littlun shook his head stubbornly.

“I was asleep when the twisty things were fighting and when they went away I was awake, and I saw something big and horrid moving in the trees.”

Ralph held out his hands for the conch and the littlun sat down.

“You were asleep. There wasn’t anyone there. How could anyone be wandering about in the forest at night? Was anyone? Did anyone go out?”

There was a long pause while the assembly grinned at the thought of anyone going out in the darkness. Then Simon stood up and Ralph looked at him in astonishment.

“You! What were you mucking about in the dark for?” Simon grabbed the conch convulsively.

“I wanted – to go to a place – a place I know.”

“What place?”

“Just a place I know. A place in the jungle.” He hesitated.

Jack settled the question for them with that contempt in his voice that could sound so funny and so final.

“He was taken short.”

With a feeling of humiliation on Simon’s behalf, Ralph took back the conch, looking Simon sternly in the face as he did so.

“Well, don’t do it again. Understand? Not at night. There’s enough silly talk about beasts, without the littluns seeing you gliding about like a – ”

The derisive laughter that rose had fear in it and condemnation. Simon opened his mouth to speak but Ralph had the conch, so he backed to his seat.

When the assembly was silent Ralph turned to Piggy.

“Well, Piggy?”

“There was another one. Him.”

The littluns pushed Percival forward, then left him by himself. He stood knee-deep in the central grass, looking at his hidden feet, trying to pretend he was in a tent. Ralph remembered another small boy who had stood like this and he flinched away from the memory. He had pushed the thought down and out of sight, where only some positive reminder like this could bring it to the surface. There had been no further numberings of the littluns, partly because there was no means of insuring that all of them were accounted for and partly because Ralph knew the answer to at least one question Piggy had asked on the mountaintop. There were little boys, fair, dark, freckled, and all dirty, but their faces were all dreadfully free of major blemishes. No one had seen the mulberry-colored birthmark again. But that time Piggy had

coaxed and bullied. Tacitly admitting that he remembered the unmentionable, Ralph nodded to Piggy.

“Go on. Ask him.”

Piggy knelt, holding the conch.

“Now then. What’s your name?”

The small boy twisted away into his tent. Piggy turned helplessly to Ralph, who spoke sharply.

“What’s your name?”

Tormented by the silence and the refusal the assembly broke into a chant.

“What’s your name? What’s your name?”

“Quiet!”

Ralph peered at the child in the twilight.

“Now tell us. What’s your name?”

“Percival Wemys Madison. The Vicarage, Harcourt St. Anthony, Hants, telephone, telephone, tele – ”

As if this information was rooted far down in the springs of sorrow, the littlun wept. His face puckered, the tears leapt from his eyes, his mouth opened till they could see a square black hole. At first he was a silent effigy of sorrow; but then the lamentation rose out of him, loud and sustained as the conch.

“Shut up, you! Shut up!”

Percival Wemys Madison would not shut up. A spring had been tapped, far beyond the reach of authority or even physical intimidation. The crying went on, breath after breath, and seemed to sustain him upright as if he were nailed to it.

“Shut up! Shut up!”

For now the littluns were no longer silent. They were reminded of their personal sorrows; and perhaps felt themselves to share in a sorrow

that was universal. They began to cry in sympathy, two of them almost as loud as Percival.

Maurice saved them. He cried out.

“Look at me!”

He pretended to fall over. He rubbed his rump and sat on the twister so that he fell in the grass. He downed badly; but Percival and the others noticed and sniffed and laughed. Presently they were all laughing so absurdly that the biguns joined in.

Jack was the first to make himself heard. He had not got the conch and thus spoke against the rules; but nobody minded.

“And what about the beast?”

Something strange was happening to Percival. He yawned and staggered, so that Jack seized and shook him.

“Where does the beast live?”

Percival sagged in Jack’s grip.

“That’s a clever beast,” said Piggy, jeering, “if it can hide on this island.” “Jack’s been everywhere – ”

“Where could a beast live?”

“Beast my foot!”

Percival muttered something and the assembly laughed again. Ralph leaned forward.

“What does he say?”

Jack listened to Percival’s answer and then let go of him. Percival, released, surrounded by the comfortable presence of humans, fell in the long grass and went to sleep.

Jack cleared his throat, then reported casually.

“He says the beast comes out of the sea.”

The last laugh died away. Ralph turned involuntarily, a black, humped figure against the lagoon. The assembly looked with him, considered the vast stretches of water, the high sea beyond, unknown

indigo of infinite possibility, heard silently the sough and whisper from the reef.

Maurice spoke, so loudly that they jumped.

“Daddy said they haven’t found all the animals in the sea yet.” Argument started again. Ralph held out the glimmering conch and

Maurice took it obediently. The meeting subsided.

“I mean when Jack says you can be frightened because people are frightened anyway that’s all right. But when he says there’s only pigs on this island I expect he’s right but he doesn’t know, not really, not certainly I mean – ” Maurice took a breath. “My daddy says there’s things, what d’you call ’em that make ink – squids – that are hundreds of yards long and eat whales whole.” He paused again and laughed gaily. “I don’t believe in the beast of course. As Piggy says, life’s scientific, but we don’t know, do we? Not certainly, I mean – ”

Someone shouted.

“A squid couldn’t come up out of the water!”

“Could!”

“Couldn’t!”

In a moment the platform was full of arguing, gesticulating shadows.

To Ralph, seated, this seemed the breaking up of sanity. Fear, beasts, no general agreement that the fire was all-important: and when one tried to get the thing straight the argument sheered off, bringing up fresh, unpleasant matter.

He could see a whiteness in the gloom near him so he grabbed it from Maurice and blew as loudly as he could. The assembly was shocked into silence. Simon was close to him, laying hands on the conch. Simon felt a perilous necessity to speak; but to speak in assembly was a terrible thing to him.

“Maybe,” he said hesitantly, “maybe there is a beast.”

The assembly cried out savagely and Ralph stood up in amazement. “You, Simon? You believe in this?”

“I don’t know,” said Simon. His heartbeats were choking him. “But. . .” The storm broke.

“Sit down!”

“Shut up!”

“Take the conch!”

“Sod you!”

“Shut up!”

Ralph shouted.

“Hear him! He’s got the conch!”

“What I mean is. . . maybe it’s only us.”

“Nuts!”

That was from Piggy, shocked out of decorum. Simon went on.

“We could be sort of. . .”

Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind’s essential illness. Inspiration came to him.

“What’s the dirtiest thing there is?”

As an answer Jack dropped into the uncomprehending silence that followed it the one crude expressive syllable. Release was immense. Those littluns who had climbed back on the twister fell off again and did not mind. The hunters were screaming with delight.

Simon’s effort fell about him in ruins; the laughter beat him cruelly and he shrank away defenceless to his seat.

At last the assembly was silent again. Someone spoke out of turn. “Maybe he means it’s some sort of ghost.”

Ralph lifted the conch and peered into the gloom. The lightest thing was the pale beach. Surely the littluns were nearer? Yes – there was no doubt about it, they were huddled into a tight knot of bodies in the central grass. A flurry of wind made the palms talk and the noise

seemed very loud now that darkness and silence made it so noticeable. Two grey trunks rubbed each other with an evil speaking that no one had noticed by day.

Piggy took the conch out of his hands. His voice was indignant. “I don’t believe in no ghosts – ever!”

Jack was up too, unaccountably angry.

“Who cares what you believe – Fatty!”

“I got the conch!”

There was the sound of a brief tussle and the conch moved to and fro. “You gimme the conch back!”

Ralph pushed between them and got a thump on the chest. He wrestled the conch from someone and sat down breathlessly.

“There’s too much talk about ghosts. We ought to have left all this for daylight.”

A hushed and anonymous voice broke in. “Perhaps that’s what the beast is – a ghost.”

The assembly was shaken as by a wind.

“There’s too much talking out of turn,” Ralph said, “because we can’t have proper assemblies if you don’t stick to the rules.”

He stopped again. The careful plan of this assembly had broken down.

“What d’you want me to say then? I was wrong to call this assembly so late. We’ll have a vote on them; on ghosts I mean; and then go to the shelters because we’re all tired. No – Jack is it? – wait a minute. I’ll say here and now that I don’t believe in ghosts. Or I don’t think I do. But I don’t like the thought of them. Not now that is, in the dark. But we were going to decide what’s what.”

He raised the conch for a moment.

“Very well then. I suppose what’s what is whether there are ghosts or not – ”

He thought for a moment, formulating the question.

“Who thinks there may be ghosts?”

For a long time there was silence and no apparent movement. Then Ralph peered into the gloom and made out the hands. He spoke flatly. “I see.”

The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away. Once there was this and that; and now – and the ship had gone.

The conch was snatched from his hands and Piggy’s voice shrilled. “I didn’t vote for no ghosts!”

He whirled round on the assembly.

“Remember that, all of you!”

They heard him stamp.

“What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages? What’s grown-ups going to think? Going off – hunting pigs – letting fires out – and now!”

A shadow fronted him tempestuously.

“You shut up, you fat slug!”

There was a moment’s struggle and the glimmering conch jiggled up and down. Ralph leapt to his feet.

“Jack! Jack! You haven’t got the conch! Let him speak.”

Jack’s face swam near him.

“And you shut up! Who are you, anyway? Sitting there telling people what to do. You can’t hunt, you can’t sing – ”

“I’m chief. I was chosen.”

“Why should choosing make any difference? Just giving orders that don’t make any sense – ”

“Piggy’s got the conch.”

“That’s right – favor Piggy as you always do – ”

“Jack!”

Jack’s voice sounded in bitter mimicry.

“Jack! Jack!”

“The rules!” shouted Ralph. “You’re breaking the rules!” “Who cares?”

Ralph summoned his wits.

“Because the rules are the only thing we’ve got!”

But Jack was shouting against him.

“Bollocks to the rules! We’re strong – we hunt! If there’s a beast, we’ll hunt it down! We’ll close in and beat and beat and beat – !”

He gave a wild whoop and leapt down to the pale sand. At once the platform was full of noise and excitement, scramblings, screams and laughter. The assembly shredded away and became a discursive and random scatter from the palms to the water and away along the beach, beyond night-sight. Ralph found his cheek touching the conch and took it from Piggy.

“What’s grown-ups going to say?” cried Piggy again. “Look at ’em!” The sound of mock hunting, hysterical laughter and real terror came from the beach.

“Blow the conch, Ralph.”

Piggy was so close that Ralph could see the glint of his one glass. “There’s the fire. Can’t they see?”

“You got to be tough now. Make ’em do what you want.”

Ralph answered in the cautious voice of one who rehearses a theorem. “If I blow the conch and they don’t come back; then we’ve had it. We shan’t keep the fire going. We’ll be like animals. We’ll never be rescued.” “If you don’t blow, we’ll soon be animals anyway. I can’t see what they’re doing but I can hear.”

The dispersed figures had come together on the sand and were a dense black mass that revolved. They were chanting something and littluns that had had enough were staggering away, howling. Ralph raised the conch to his lips and then lowered it.

“The trouble is: Are there ghosts, Piggy? Or beasts?”

“Course there aren’t.”

“Why not?”

“Cos things wouldn’t make sense. Houses an’ streets, an’ – TV – they wouldn’t work.”

The dancing, chanting boys had worked themselves away till their sound was nothing but a wordless rhythm.

“But s’pose they don’t make sense? Not here, on this island? Supposing things are watching us and waiting?”

Ralph shuddered violently and moved closer to Piggy, so that they bumped frighteningly.

“You stop talking like that! We got enough trouble, Ralph, an’ I’ve had

as much as I can stand. If there is ghosts – ” “I ought to give up being chief. Hear ’em.” “Oh lord! Oh no!”

Piggy gripped Ralph’s arm.

“If Jack was chief he’d have all hunting and no fire. We’d be here till we died.”

His voice ran up to a squeak. “Who’s that sitting there?”

“Me. Simon.”

“Fat lot of good we are,” said Ralph. “Three blind mice. I’ll give up.” “If you give up,” said Piggy, in an appalled whisper, “what ’ud happen to me?”

“Nothing.”

“He hates me. I dunno why. If he could do what he wanted – you’re all right, he respects you. Besides – you’d hit him.”

“You were having a nice fight with him just now.”

“I had the conch,” said Piggy simply. “I had a right to speak.”

Simon stirred in the dark.

”Go on being chief.“

"You shut up, young Simon! Why couldn't you say there wasn't a beast?"

"I'm scared of him," said Piggy, "and that's why I know him. If you're scared of someone you hate him but you can't stop thinking about him. You kid yourself he's all right really, an' then when you see him again; it's like asthma an' you can't breathe. I tell you what. He hates you too, Ralph –"

"Me? Why me?"

"I dunno. You got him over the fire; an' you're chief an' he isn't."

"But he's, he's, Jack Merridew!"

"I been in bed so much I done some thinking. I know about people. I know about me. And him. He can't hurt you: but if you stand out of the way he'd hurt the next thing. And that's me."

"Piggy's right, Ralph. There's you and Jack. Go on being chief."

"We're all drifting and things are going rotten. At home there was always a grown-up. Please, sir, please, miss; and then you got an answer. How I wish!"

"I wish my auntie was here."

"I wish my father. . . Oh, what's the use?"

"Keep the fire going."

The dance was over and the hunters were going back to the shelters. "Grown-ups know things," said Piggy. "They ain't afraid of the dark."

They'd meet and have tea and discuss. Then things 'ud be all right – "They wouldn't set fire to the island. Or lose –"

"They'd build a ship –"

The three boys stood in the darkness, striving unsuccessfully to convey the majesty of adult life.

"They wouldn't quarrel –"

"Or break my specs –"

"Or talk about a beast –"

“If only they could get a message to us,” cried Ralph desperately. “If only they could send us something grown-up.... a sign or something.”

A thin wail out of the darkness chilled them and set them grabbing for each other. Then the wail rose, remote and unearthly, and turned to an inarticulate gibbering. Percival Wemys Madison, of the Vicarage, Harcourt St. Anthony, lying in the long grass, was living through circumstances in which the incantation of his address was powerless to help him.