

7 Shadows and Tall Trees

The pig-run kept close to the jumble of rocks that lay down by the water on the other side and Ralph was content to follow Jack along it. If you could shut your ears to the slow suck down of the sea and boil of the return, if you could forget how dun and unvisited were the ferny coverts on either side, then there was a chance that you might put the beast out of mind and dream for a while. The sun had swung over the vertical and the afternoon heat was closing in on the island. Ralph passed a message forward to Jack and when they next came to fruit the whole party stopped and ate.

Sitting, Ralph was aware of the heat for the first time that day. He pulled distastefully at his grey shirt and wondered whether he might undertake the adventure of washing it. Sitting under what seemed an unusual heat, even for this island, Ralph planned his toilet. He would like to have a pair of scissors and cut this hair – he flung the mass back – cut this filthy hair right back to half an inch. He would like to have a bath, a proper wallow with soap. He passed his tongue experimentally over his teeth and decided that a toothbrush would come in handy too. Then there were his nails –

Ralph turned his hand over and examined them. They were bitten down to the quick though he could not remember when he had restarted this habit nor any time when he indulged it.

“Be sucking my thumb next – ”

He looked round, furtively. Apparently no one had heard. The hunters sat, stuffing themselves with this easy meal, trying to convince themselves that they got sufficient kick out of bananas and that other olive-grey, jellylike fruit. With the memory of his sometime clean self as a standard, Ralph looked them over. They were dirty, not with the spectacular dirt of boys who have fallen into mud or been brought down hard on a rainy day. Not one of them was an obvious subject for a shower, and yet – hair, much too long, tangled here and there, knotted round a dead leaf or a twig; faces cleaned fairly well by the process of eating and sweating but marked in the less accessible angles

with a kind of shadow; clothes, worn away, stiff like his own with sweat, put on, not for decorum or comfort but out of custom; the skin of the body, scurfy with brine –

He discovered with a little fall of the heart that these were the conditions he took as normal now and that he did not mind. He sighed and pushed away the stalk from which he had stripped the fruit. Already the hunters were stealing away to do their business in the woods or down by the rocks. He turned and looked out to sea.

Here, on the other side of the island, the view was utterly different. The filmy enchantments of mirage could not endure the cold ocean water and the horizon was hard, clipped blue. Ralph wandered down to the rocks. Down here, almost on a level with the sea, you could follow with your eye the ceaseless, bulging passage of the deep sea waves. They were miles wide, apparently not breakers or the banked ridges of shallow water. They traveled the length of the island with an air of disregarding it and being set on other business; they were less a progress than a momentous rise and fall of the whole ocean. Now the sea would suck down, making cascades and waterfalls of retreating water, would sink past the rocks and plaster down the seaweed like shining hair: then, pausing, gather and rise with a roar, irresistibly swelling over point and outcrop, climbing the little cliff, sending at last an arm of surf up a gully to end a yard or so from him in fingers of spray.

Wave after wave, Ralph followed the rise and fall until something of the remoteness of the sea numbed his brain. Then gradually the almost infinite size of this water forced itself on his attention. This was the divider, the barrier. On the other side of the island, swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon, one might dream of rescue; but here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean, the miles of division, one was clamped down, one was helpless, one was condemned, one was –

Simon was speaking almost in his ear. Ralph found that he had rock painfully gripped in both hands, found his body arched, the muscles of his neck stiff, his mouth strained open.

“You’ll get back to where you came from.”

Simon nodded as he spoke. He was kneeling on one knee, looking down from a higher rock which he held with both hands; his other leg stretched down to Ralph’s level.

Ralph was puzzled and searched Simon’s face for a clue.

“It’s so big, I mean – ”

Simon nodded.

“All the same. You’ll get back all right. I think so, anyway.”

Some of the strain had gone from Ralph’s body. He glanced at the sea and then smiled bitterly at Simon. “Got a ship in your pocket?”

Simon grinned and shook his head. “How do you know, then?”

When Simon was still silent Ralph said curtly, “You’re batty.”

Simon shook his head violently till the coarse black hair flew backwards and forwards across his face.

“No, I’m not. I just you’ll get back all right.”

For a moment nothing more was said. And then they suddenly smiled at each other.

Roger called from the coverts.

“Come and see!”

The ground was turned over near the pig-run and there were droppings that steamed. Jack bent down to them as though he loved them.

“Ralph – we need meat even if we are hunting the other thing.”

“If you mean going the right way, we’ll hunt.”

They set off again, the hunters bunched a little by fear of the mentioned beast, while Jack quested ahead. They went more slowly than Ralph had bargained for; yet in a way he was glad to loiter, cradling his spear. Jack came up against some emergency of his craft and soon the procession stopped. Ralph leaned against a tree and at

once the daydreams came swarming up. Jack was in charge of the hunt and there would be time to get to the mountain –

Once, following his father from Chatham to Devonport, they had lived in a cottage on the edge of the moors. In the succession of houses that Ralph had known, this one stood out with particular clarity because after that house he had been sent away to school. Mummy had still been with them and Daddy had come home every day. Wild ponies came to the stone wall at the bottom of the garden, and it had snowed. Just behind the cottage there was a sort of shed and you could lie up there, watching the flakes swirl past. You could see the damp spot where each flake died, then you could mark the first flake that lay down without melting and watch, the whole ground turn white. You could go indoors when you were cold and look out of the window, past the bright copper kettle and the plate with the little blue men.

When you went to bed there was a bowl of cornflakes with sugar and cream. And the books – they stood on the shelf by the bed, leaning together with always two or three laid flat on top because he had not bothered to put them back properly. They were dog-eared and scratched. There was the bright, shining one about Topsy and Mopsy that he never read because it was about two girls; there was the one about the magician which you read with a kind of tied-down terror, skipping page twenty-seven with the awful picture of the spider; there was a book about people who had dug things up, Egyptian things; there was *The Boy's Book of Trains*, *The Boy's Book of Ships*. Vividly they came before him; he could have reached up and touched them, could feel the weight and slow slide with which *The Mammoth Book for Boys* would come out and slither down. . . . Everything was all right; everything was good-humored and friendly.

The bushes crashed ahead of them. Boys flung themselves wildly from the pig track and scabbled in the creepers, screaming. Ralph saw Jack nudged aside and fall. Then there was a creature bounding along the pig track toward him, with tusks gleaming and an intimidating grunt. Ralph found he was able to measure the distance coldly and take aim. With the boar only five yards away, he flung the foolish wooden

stick that he carried, saw it hit the great snout and hang there for a moment. The boar's note changed to a squeal and it swerved aside into the covert. The pig-run filled with shouting boys again, Jack came running back, and poked about in the undergrowth.

“Through here – ”

“But he'd do us!”

“Through here, I said – ”

The boar was floundering away from them. They found another pigrun parallel to the first and Jack raced away. Ralph was full of fright and apprehension and pride.

“I hit him! The spear stuck in – ”

Now they came, unexpectedly, to an open space by the sea. Jack cast about on the bare rock and looked anxious.

“He's gone.”

“I hit him,” said Ralph again, “and the spear stuck in a bit.”

He felt the need of witnesses.

“Didn't you see me?”

Maurice nodded.

“I saw you. Right bang on his snout – Wheee!”

Ralph talked on, excitedly.

“I hit him all right. The spear stuck in. I wounded him!”

He sunned himself in their new respect and felt that hunting was good after all.

“I walloped him properly. That was the beast, I think!” Jack came back. “That wasn't the beast. That was a boar.”

“I hit him.”

“Why didn't you grab him? I tried – ”

Ralph's voice ran up.

“But a boar!”

Jack flushed suddenly.

“You said he’d do us. What did you want to throw for? Why didn’t you wait?”

He held out his arm.

“Look.”

He turned his left forearm for them all to see. On the outside was a rip; not much, but bloody.

“He did that with his tusks. I couldn’t get my spear down in time.” Attention focused on Jack.

“That’s a wound,” said Simon, “and you ought to suck it. Like Berengaria.”

Jack sucked.

“I hit him,” said Ralph indignantly. “I hit him with my spear, I wounded him.”

He tried for their attention.

“He was coming along the path. I threw, like this – ”

Robert snarled at him. Ralph entered into the play and everybody laughed. Presently they were all jabbing at Robert who made mock rushes.

Jack shouted.

“Make a ring!”

The circle moved in and round. Robert squealed in mock terror, then in real pain.

“Ow! Stop it! You’re hurting!”

The butt end of a spear fell on his back as he blundered among them. “Hold him!”

They got his arms and legs. Ralph, carried away by a sudden thick excitement, grabbed Eric’s spear and jabbed at Robert with it.

“Kill him! Kill him!”

All at once, Robert was screaming and struggling with the strength of frenzy. Jack had him by the hair and was brandishing his knife. Behind him was Roger, fighting to get close. The chant rose ritually, as at the last moment of a dance or a hunt.

“Kill the pig! Cut his throat! Kill the pig! Bash him in!”

Ralph too was fighting to get near, to get a handful of that brown, vulnerable flesh. The desire to squeeze and hurt was over-mastering.

Jack’s arm came down; the heaving circle cheered and made pig-dying noises. Then they lay quiet, panting, listening to Robert’s frightened snivels. He wiped his face with a dirty arm, and made an effort to retrieve his status.

“Oh, my bum!”

He rubbed his rump ruefully. Jack rolled over.

“That was a good game.”

“Just a game,” said Ralph uneasily. “I got jolly badly hurt at rigger once.”

“We ought to have a drum,” said Maurice, “then we could do it properly.”

Ralph looked at him.

“How properly?”

“I dunno. You want a fire, I think, and a drum, and you keep time to the drum.

“You want a pig,” said Roger, “like a real hunt.”

“Or someone to pretend,” said Jack. “You could get someone to dress up as a pig and then he could act – you know, pretend to knock me over and all that.”

“You want a real pig,” said Robert, still caressing his rump, “because you’ve got to kill him.”

“Use a littlun,” said Jack, and everybody laughed.

Ralph sat up.

“Well. We shan’t find what we’re looking for at this rate.” One by one they stood up, twitching rags into place. Ralph looked at Jack.

“Now for the mountain.”

“Shouldn’t we go back to Piggy,” said Maurice, “before dark?”

The twins nodded like one boy.

“Yes, that’s right. Let’s go up there in the morning.”

Ralph looked out and saw the sea.

“We’ve got to start the fire again.”

“You haven’t got Piggy’s specs,” said Jack, “so you can’t.”

“Then we’ll find out if the mountain’s clear.”

Maurice spoke, hesitating, not wanting to seem a funk.

“Supposing the beast’s up there?”

Jack brandished his spear.

“We’ll kill it.”

The sun seemed a little cooler. He slashed with the spear.

“What are we waiting for?”

“I suppose,” said Ralph, “if we keep on by the sea this way, we’ll come out below the burnt bit and then we can climb the mountain.”

Once more Jack led them along by the suck and heave of the blinding sea.

Once more Ralph dreamed, letting his skillful feet deal with the difficulties of the path. Yet here his feet seemed less skillful than before. For most of the way they were forced right down to the bare rock by the water and had to edge along between that and the dark luxuriance of the forest. There were little cliffs to be scaled, some to be used as paths, lengthy traverses where one used hands as well as feet. Here and there they could clamber over wave-wet rock, leaping across clear pools that the tide had left. They came to a gully that split the narrow foreshore like a defense. This seemed to have no bottom and they peered awe-stricken into the gloomy crack where water gurgled. Then

the wave came back, the gully boiled before them and spray dashed up to the very creeper so that the boys were wet and shrieking. They tried the forest but it was thick and woven like a bird's nest. In the end they had to jump one by one, waiting till the water sank; and even so, some of them got a second drenching. After that the rocks seemed to be growing impassable so they sat for a time, letting their rags dry and watching the clipped outlines of the rollers that moved so slowly past the island. They found fruit in a haunt of bright little birds that hovered like insects. Then Ralph said they were going too slowly. He himself climbed a tree and parted the canopy, and saw the square head of the mountain seeming still a great way off. Then they tried to hurry along the rocks and Robert cut his knee quite badly and they had to recognize that this path must be taken slowly if they were to be safe. So they proceeded after that as if they were climbing a dangerous mountain, until the rocks became an uncompromising cliff, overhung with impossible jungle and falling sheer into the sea.

Ralph looked at the sun critically.

“Early evening. After tea-time, at any rate.”

“I don't remember this cliff,” said Jack, crestfallen, “so this must be the bit of the coast I missed”

Ralph nodded.

“Let me think.”

By now, Ralph had no self-consciousness in public thinking but would treat the day's decisions as though he were playing chess. The only trouble was that he would never be a very good chess player. He thought of the littluns and Piggy. Vividly he imagined Piggy by himself, huddled in a shelter that was silent except for the sounds of nightmare.

“We can't leave the littluns alone with Piggy. Not all night.”

The other boys said nothing but stood round, watching him.

“If we went back we should take hours.”

Jack cleared his throat and spoke in a queer, tight voice. “We mustn’t let anything happen to Piggy, must we?” Ralph tapped his teeth with the dirty point of Eric’s spear.

“If we go across – ”

He glanced round him.

“Someone’s got to go across the island and tell Piggy we’ll be back after dark.”

Bill spoke, unbelieving.

“Through the forest by himself? Now?” “We can’t spare more than one.”

Simon pushed his way to Ralph’s elbow. “I’ll go if you like. I don’t mind, honestly.”

Before Ralph had time to reply, he smiled quickly, turned and climbed into the forest.

Ralph looked back at Jack, seeing him, infuriatingly, for the first time. “Jack – that time you went the whole way to the castle rock.

Jack glowered.

“Yes?”

“You came along part of this shore – below the mountain, beyond there.” “Yes.”

“And then?”

“I found a pig-run. It went for miles.”

“So the pig-run must be somewhere in there.”

Ralph nodded. He pointed at the forest.

Everybody agreed, sagely.

“All right then. We’ll smash a way through till we find the pig-run.” He took a step and halted.

“Wait a minute though! Where does the pig-run go to?”

“The mountain,” said Jack, “I told you.” He sneered. “Don’t you want to go to the mountain?”

Ralph sighed, sensing the rising antagonism, understanding that this was how Jack felt as soon as he ceased to lead.

“I was thinking of the light. We’ll be stumbling about.” “We were going to look for the beast.”

“There won’t be enough light.”

“I don’t mind going,” said Jack hotly. “I’ll go when we get there. Won’t you? Would you rather go back to the shelters and tell Piggy?”

Now it was Ralph’s turn to flush but he spoke despairingly, out of the new understanding that Piggy had given him.

“Why do you hate me?”

The boys stirred uneasily, as though something indecent had been said. The silence lengthened.

Ralph, still hot and hurt, turned away first.

“Come on.”

He led the way and set himself as by right to hack at the tangles. Jack brought up the rear, displaced and brooding.

The pig-track was a dark tunnel, for the sun was sliding quickly toward the edge of the world and in the forest shadows were never far to seek. The track was broad and beaten and they ran along at a swift trot. Then the roof of leaves broke up and they halted, breathing quickly, looking at the few stars that pricked round the head of the mountain.

“There you are.”

The boys peered at each other doubtfully. Ralph made a decision. “We’ll go straight across to the platform and climb tomorrow.” They murmured agreement; but Jack was standing by his shoulder. “If you’re frightened of course – ”

Ralph turned on him.

“Who went first on the castle rock?”

“I went too. And that was daylight.”

“All right. Who wants to climb the mountain now?” Silence was the only answer.

“Samneric? What about you?”

”We ought to go an’ tell Piggy – ”

“ – yes, tell Piggy that – “

“But Simon went!”

“We ought to tell Piggy – in case – ”

“Robert? Bill?”

They were going straight back to the platform now. Not, of course, that they were afraid – but tired.

Ralph turned back to Jack.

“You see?”

“I’m going up the mountain.” The words came from Jack viciously, as though they were a curse. He looked at Ralph, his thin body tensed, his spear held as if he threatened him.

“I’m going up the mountain to look for the beast – now.”

Then the supreme sting, the casual, bitter word.

“Coming?”

At that word the other boys forgot their urge to be gone and turned back to sample this fresh rub of two spirits in the dark. The word was too good, too bitter, too successfully daunting to be repeated. It took Ralph at low water when his nerve was relaxed for the return to the shelter and the still, friendly waters of the lagoon.

“I don’t mind.”

Astonished, he heard his voice come out, cool and casual, so that the bitterness of Jack’s taunt fell powerless. “If you don’t mind, of course.”

“Oh, not at all.”

Jack took a step.

“Well then – ”

Side by side, watched by silent boys, the two started up the mountain. Ralph stopped.

“We’re silly. Why should only two go? If we find anything, two won’t be enough.”

There came the sound of boys scuttling away. Astonishingly, a dark figure moved against the tide. “Roger?”

“Yes.”

“That’s three, then.”

Once more they set out to climb the slope of the mountain. The darkness seemed to flow round them like a tide. Jack, who had said nothing, began to choke and cough, and a gust of wind set all three spluttering. Ralph’s eyes were blinded with tears.

“Ashes. We’re on the edge of the burnt patch.”

Their footsteps and the occasional breeze were stirring up small devils of dust. Now that they stopped again, Ralph had time while he coughed to remember how silly they were. If there was no beast – and almost certainly there was no beast – in that case, well and good; but if there was something waiting on top of the mountain – what was the use of three of them, handicapped by the darkness and carrying only sticks?

“We’re being fools.”

Out of the darkness came the answer.

“Windy?”

Irritably Ralph shook himself. This was all Jack’s fault.

“ ‘Course I am. But we’re still being fools.”

“If you don’t want to go on,” said the voice sarcastically, “I’ll go up by myself.”

Ralph heard the mockery and hated Jack. The sting of ashes in his eyes, tiredness, fear, enraged him.

“Go on then! We’ll wait here.”

There was silence.

“Why don’t you go? Are you frightened?” A stain in the darkness, a stain that was Jack, detached itself and began to draw away.

“All right. So long.”

The stain vanished. Another took its place.

Ralph felt his knee against something hard and rocked a charred trunk that was edgy to the touch. He felt the sharp cinders that had been bark push against the back of his knee and knew that Roger had sat down.

He felt with his hands and lowered himself beside Roger, while the trunk rocked among invisible ashes. Roger, uncommunicative by nature, said nothing. He offered no opinion on the beast nor told Ralph why he had chosen to come on this mad expedition. He simply sat and rocked the trunk gently. Ralph noticed a rapid and infuriating tapping noise and realized that Roger was banging his silly wooden stick against something.

So they sat, the rocking, tapping, impervious Roger and Ralph, fuming; round them the close sky was loaded with stars, save where the mountain punched up a hole of blackness.

There was a slithering noise high above them, the sound of someone taking giant and dangerous strides on rock or ash. Then Jack found them, and was shivering and croaking in a voice they could just recognize as his.

“I saw a thing on top.”

They heard him blunder against the trunk which rocked violently. He lay silent for a moment, then muttered.

“Keep a good lookout. It may be following.”

A shower of ash pattered round them. Jack sat up.

“I saw a thing bulge on the mountain.”

“You only imagined it,” said Ralph shakily, “because nothing would bulge. Not any sort of creature.”

Roger spoke; they jumped, for they had forgotten him. “A frog.”
Jack giggled and shuddered.

“Some frog. There was a noise too. A kind of ‘plop’ noise. Then the thing bulged.”

Ralph surprised himself, not so much by the quality of his voice, which was even, but by the bravado of its intention.

“We’ll go and look.”

For the first time since he had first known Jack, Ralph could feel him hesitate.

“Now – ?”

His voice spoke for him.

“Of course.”

He got off the trunk and led the way across the clinking cinders up into the dark, and the others followed.

Now that his physical voice was silent the inner voice of reason, and other voices too, made themselves heard. Piggy was calling him a kid. Another voice told him not to be a fool; and the darkness and desperate enterprise gave the night a kind of dentist’s chair unreality.

As they came to the last slope, Jack and Roger drew near, changed from the ink-stains to distinguishable figures. By common consent they stopped and crouched together. Behind them, on the horizon, was a patch of lighter sky where in a moment the moon would rise. The wind roared once in the forest and pushed their rags against them.

Ralph stirred. “Come on.”

They crept forward, Roger lagging a little. Jack and Ralph turned the shoulder of the mountain together. The glittering lengths of the lagoon lay below them and beyond that a long white smudge that was the reef. Roger joined them.

Jack whispered.

“Let’s creep forward on hands and knees. Maybe it’s asleep.”

Roger and Ralph moved on, this time leaving Jack in the rear, for all his brave words. They came to the flat top where the rock was hard to hands and knees.

A creature that bulged.

Ralph put his hand in the cold, soft ashes of the fire and smothered a cry. His hand and shoulder were twitching from the unlooked-for contact. Green lights of nausea appeared for a moment and ate into the darkness. Roger lay behind him and Jack's mouth was at his ear.

“Over there, where there used to be a gap in the rock. A sort of hump – see?”

Ashes blew into Ralph's face from the dead fire. He could not see the gap or anything else, because the green lights were opening again and growing, and the top of the mountain was sliding sideways.

Once more, from a distance, he heard Jack's whisper.

“Scared?”

Not scared so much as paralyzed; hung up there immovable on the top of a diminishing, moving mountain. Jack slid away from him, Roger bumped, fumbled with a hiss of breath, and passed onwards. He heard them whispering.

“Can you see anything?”

“There – ”

In front of them, only three or four yards away, was a rock-like hump where no rock should be. Ralph could hear a tiny chattering noise coming from somewhere – perhaps from his own mouth. He bound himself together with his will, fused his fear and loathing into a hatred, and stood up. He took two leaden steps forward.

Behind them the silver of moon had drawn clear of the horizon. Before them, something like a great ape was sitting asleep with its head between its knees. Then the wind roared in the forest, there was confusion in the darkness and the creature lifted its head, holding toward them the ruin of a face.

Ralph found himself taking giant strides among the ashes, heard other creatures crying out and leaping and dared the impossible on the dark slope; presently the mountain was deserted, save for the three abandoned sticks and the thing that bowed.