**Chapter 2 – Fire on the Mountain**

**Part 2**

“But there isn’t a snake!”

“We’ll make sure when we go hunting.”

Ralph was annoyed and, for the moment, defeated. He felt himself

facing something ungraspable. The eyes that looked so intently at him

were without humor.

“But there isn’t a beast!”

Something he had not known was there rose in him and compelled him

to make the point, loudly and again.

“But I tell you there isn’t a beast!”

The assembly was silent.

Ralph lifted the conch again and his good humor came back as he

thought of what he had to say next.

“Now we come to the most important thing. I’ve been thinking. I was

thinking while we were climbing the mountain.” He flashed a conspiratorial

grin at the other two. “And on the beach just now. This is what I

thought. We want to have fun. And we want to be rescued.”

The passionate noise of agreement from the assembly hit him like a wave and

he lost his thread. He thought again.

“We want to be rescued; and of course we shall be rescued.”

Voices babbled. The simple statement, unbacked by any proof but the

weight of Ralph’s new authority, brought light and happiness. He had to

wave the conch before he could make them hear him.

“My father’s in the Navy. He said there aren’t any unknown islands left.

He says the Queen has a big room full of maps and all the islands in the

world are drawn there. So the Queen’s got a picture of this island.”

Again came the sounds of cheerfulness and better heart.

“And sooner or later a ship will put in here. It might even be Daddy’s

ship. So you see, sooner or later, we shall be rescued.”

He paused, with the point made. The assembly was lifted toward safety

by his words. They liked and now respected him. Spontaneously they

began to clap and presently the platform was loud with applause. Ralph

flushed, looking sideways at Piggy’s open admiration, and then the other

way at Jack who was smirking and showing that he too knew how to

clap.

Ralph waved the conch.

“Shut up! Wait! Listen!”

He went on in the silence, borne on his triumph.

“There’s another thing. We can help them to find us. If a ship comes

near the island they may not notice us. So we must make smoke on top

of the mountain. We must make a fire.” “A fire! Make a fire!”

At once half the boys were on their feet. Jack clamored among them,

the conch forgotten.

“Come on! Follow me!”

The space under the palm trees was full of noise and movement. Ralph

was on his feet too, shouting for quiet, but no one heard him. All at once

the crowd swayed toward the island and was gone–following Jack. Even

the tiny children went and did their best among the leaves and broken

branches. Ralph was left, holding the conch, with no one but Piggy.

Piggy’s breathing was quite restored.

“Like kids!” he said scornfully. “Acting like a crowd of kids!”

Ralph looked at him doubtfully and laid the conch on the tree trunk.

“I bet it’s gone tea-time,” said Piggy. “What do they think they’re going

to do on that mountain?”

He caressed the shell respectfully, then stopped and looked up.

“Ralph! Hey! Where you going?”

Ralph was already clambering over the first smashed swathes of the

scar. A long way ahead of him was crashing and laughter.

Piggy watched him in disgust.

“Like a crowd of kids–”

He sighed, bent, and laced up his shoes. The noise of the errant assembly

faded up the mountain. Then, with the martyred expression of a

parent who has to keep up with the senseless ebullience of the children,

he picked up the conch, turned toward the forest, and began to pick his

way over the tumbled scar.

Below the other side of the mountain top was a platform of forest.

Once more Ralph found himself making the cupping gesture.

“Down there we could get as much wood as we want.”

Jack nodded and pulled at his underlip. Starting perhaps a hundred

feet below them on the steeper side of the mountain, the patch might

have been designed expressly for fuel. Trees, forced by the damp heat,

found too little soil for full growth, fell early and decayed: creepers cradled

them, and new saplings searched a way up.

Jack turned to the choir, who stood ready. Their black caps of maintenance

were slid over one ear like berets.

“We’ll build a pile. Come on.”

They found the likeliest path down and began tugging at the dead

wood. And the small boys who had reached the top came sliding too till

everyone but Piggy was busy. Most of the wood was so rotten that when

they pulled, it broke up into a shower of fragments and woodlice and

decay; but some trunks came out in one piece. The twins, Sam ’n Eric,

were the first to get a likely log but they could do nothing till Ralph, Jack,

Simon, Roger and Maurice found room for a hand-hold. Then they inched

the grotesque dead thing up the rock and toppled it over on top. Each

party of boys added a quota, less or more, and the pile grew. At the return

Ralph found himself alone on a limb with Jack and they grinned at each

other, sharing this burden. Once more, amid the breeze, the shouting,

the slanting sunlight on the high mountain, was shed that glamour, that

strange invisible light of friendship, adventure, and content.

“Almost too heavy.”

Jack grinned back.

“Not for the two of us.”

Together, joined in an effort by the burden, they staggered up the last

steep Of the mountain. Together, they chanted One! Two! Three! and

crashed the log on to the great pile. Then they stepped back, laughing

with triumphant pleasure, so that immediately Ralph had to stand on his

head. Below them, boys were still laboring, though some of the small

ones had lost interest and were searching this new forest for fruit. Now

the twins, with unsuspected intelligence, came up the mountain with

armfuls of dried leaves and dumped them against the pile. One by one,

as they sensed that the pile was complete, the boys stopped going back

for more and stood, with the pink, shattered top of the mountain around

them. Breath came evenly by now, and sweat dried.

Ralph and Jack looked at each other while society paused about them.

The shameful knowledge grew in them and they did not know how to

begin confession.

Ralph spoke first, crimson in the face.

“Will you?” He cleared his throat and went on.

“Will you light the fire?”

Now the absurd situation was open, Jack blushed too. He began to

mutter vaguely.

“You rub two sticks. You rub–”

He glanced at Ralph, who blurted out the last confession of incompetence.

“Has anyone got any matches?”

“You make a bow and spin the arrow,” said Roger. He rubbed his hands

in mime. “Psss. Psss.”

A little air was moving over the mountain. Piggy came with it, in shorts

and shirt, laboring cautiously out of the forest with the evening sunlight

gleaming from his glasses. He held the conch under his arm.

Ralph shouted at him.

“Piggy! Have you got any matches?”

The other boys took up the cry till the mountain rang. Piggy shook his

head and came to the pile.

“My! You’ve made a big heap, haven’t you?”

Jack pointed suddenly.

“His specs–use them as burning glasses!”

Piggy was surrounded before he could back away.

“Here–let me go!” His voice rose to a shriek of terror as Jack snatched

the glasses off his face. “Mind out! Give ’em back! I can hardly see! You’ll break the conch!”

Ralph elbowed him to the side and knelt by the pile.

“Stand out of the light.”

There was pushing and pulling and officious cries. Ralph moved the

lenses back and forth, this way and that, till a glossy white image of the

declining sun lay on a piece of rotten wood. Almost at once a thin trickle

of smoke rose up and made him cough. Jack knelt too and blew gently,

so that the smoke drifted away, thickening, and a tiny flame appeared.

The flame, nearly invisible at first in that bright sunlight, enveloped a

small twig, grew, was enriched with color and reached up to a branch

which exploded with a sharp crack. The flame flapped higher and the

boys broke into a cheer.

“My specs!” howled Piggy. “Give me my specs!”

Ralph stood away from the pile and put the glasses into Piggy’s groping

hands. His voice subsided to a mutter.

“Jus’ blurs, that’s all. Hardly see my hand–”

The boys were dancing. The pile was so rotten, and now so tinder-dry,

that whole limbs yielded passionately to the yellow flames that poured

upwards and shook a great beard of flame twenty feet in the air. For

yards round the fire the heat was like a blow, and the breeze was a river

of sparks. Trunks crumbled to white dust.

Ralph shouted.

“More wood! All of you get more wood!” Life became a race with the fire

and the boys scattered through the

upper forest. To keep a clean flag of flame flying on the mountain was

the immediate end and no one looked further. Even the smallest boys,

unless fruit claimed them, brought little pieces of wood and threw them

in. The air moved a little faster and became a light wind, so that leeward

and windward side were clearly differentiated. On one side the air was

cool, but on the other the fire thrust out a savage arm of heat that crinkled

hair on the instant. Boys who felt the evening wind on their damp faces

paused to enjoy the freshness of it and then found they were exhausted.

They flung themselves down in the shadows that lay among the shattered

rocks. The beard of flame diminished quickly; then the pile fell inwards

with a soft, cindery sound, and sent a great tree of sparks upwards that

leaned away and drifted downwind. The boys lay, panting like dogs.

Ralph raised his head off his forearms.

“That was no good.”

Roger spat efficiently into the hot dust.

“What d’you mean?”

“There wasn’t any smoke. Only flame.”

Piggy had settled himself in a space between two rocks, and sat with

the conch on his knees.

“We haven’t made a fire,” he said, “what’s any use. We couldn’t keep a

fire like that going, not if we tried.”

“A fat lot you tried,” said Jack contemptuously. “You just sat.” “We used

his specs,” said Simon, smearing a black cheek with his forearm. “He helped that way.”

“I got the conch,” said Piggy indignantly. “You let me speak!”

“The conch doesn’t count on top of the mountain,” said Jack, “so you

shut up.”

“I got the conch in my hand.”

“Put on green branches,” said Maurice. “That’s the best way to make

smoke.”

“I got the conch–”

Jack turned fiercely.

“You shut up!”

Piggy wilted. Ralph took the conch from him and looked round the

circle of boys.

“We’ve got to have special people for looking after the fire. Any day

there may be a ship out there“–he waved his arm at the taut wire of the

horizon–“and if we have a signal going they’ll come and take us off. And

another thing. We ought to have more rules. Where the conch is, that’s a

meeting. The same up here as down there.”