**Chapter 2 – Fire on the Mountain**

**Part 3**

They assented. Piggy opened his mouth to speak, caught Jack’s eye

and shut it again. Jack held out his hands for the conch and stood up,

holding the delicate thing carefully in his sooty hands.

“I agree with Ralph. We’ve got to have rules and obey them. After all,

we’re not savages. We’re English, and the English are best at everything. So

we’ve got to do the right things.”

He turned to Ralph.

“Ralph, I’ll split up the choir–my hunters, that is–into groups, and we’ll

be responsible for keeping the fire going–”

This generosity brought a spatter of applause from the boys, so that

Jack grinned at them, then waved the conch for silence.

“We’ll let the fire burn out now. Who would see smoke at night-time,

anyway? And we can start the fire again whenever we like. Altos, you

can keep the fire going this week, and trebles the next–”

The assembly assented gravely.

“And we’ll be responsible for keeping a lookout too. If we see a ship out

there“–they followed the direction of his bony arm with their eyes–“we’ll

put green branches on. Then there’ll be more smoke.”

They gazed intently at the dense blue of the horizon, as if a little silhouette

might appear there at any moment.

The sun in the west was a drop of burning gold that slid nearer and

nearer the sill of the world. All at once they were aware of the evening

as the end of light and warmth.

Roger took the conch and looked round at them gloomily.

“I’ve been watching the sea. There hasn’t been the trace of a ship.

Perhaps we’ll never be rescued.”

A murmur rose and swept away. Ralph took back the conch.

“I said before we’ll be rescued sometime. We’ve just got to wait, that’s all.”

Daring, indignant, Piggy took the conch.

“That’s what I said! I said about our meetings and things and then you

said shut up–”

His voice lifted into the whine of virtuous recrimination. They stirred

and began to shout him down.

“You said you wanted a small fire and you been and built a pile like a

hayrick. If I say anything,” cried Piggy, with bitter realism, “you say shut

up; but if Jack or Maurice or Simon–”

He paused in the tumult, standing, looking beyond them and down the

unfriendly side of the mountain to the great patch where they had found

dead wood. Then he laughed so strangely that they were hushed, looking

at the flash of his spectacles in astonishment. They followed his gaze to

find the sour joke.

“You got your small fire all right.”

Smoke was rising here and there among the creepers that festooned

the dead or dying trees. As they watched, a flash of fire appeared at the

root of one wisp, and then the smoke thickened. Small flames stirred

at the trunk of a tree and crawled away through leaves and brushwood,

dividing and increasing. One patch touched a tree trunk and scrambled

up like a bright squirrel. The smoke increased, sifted, rolled outwards.

The squirrel leapt on the wings of the wind and clung to another standing

tree, eating downwards. Beneath the dark canopy of leaves and smoke the

fire laid hold on the forest and began to gnaw. Acres of black and

yellow smoke rolled steadily toward the sea. At the sight of the flames

and the irresistible course of the fire, the boys broke into shrill, excited

cheering. The flames, as though they were a kind of wild life, crept as a

jaguar creeps on its belly toward a line of birch-like saplings that fledged

an outcrop of the pink rock. They flapped at the first of the trees, and

the branches grew a brief foliage of fire. The heart of flame leapt nimbly across

the gap between the trees and then went swinging and flaring

along the whole row of them. Beneath the capering boys a quarter of

a mile square of forest was savage with smoke and flame. The separate

noises of the fire merged into a drum-roll that seemed to shake the

mountain.

“You got your small fire all right.”

Startled, Ralph realized that the boys were falling still and silent, feeling

the beginnings of awe at the power set free below them. The knowledge

and the awe made him savage.

“Oh, shut up!”

“I got the conch,” said Piggy, in a hurt voice. “I got a right to speak.”

They looked at him with eyes that lacked interest in what they saw, and

cocked ears at the drum-roll of the fire. Piggy glanced nervously into hell

and cradled the conch.

“We got to let that burn out now. And that was our firewood.”

He licked his lips. “There ain’t nothing we can do. We ought to be more careful. I’m

scared–”

Jack dragged his eyes away from the fire.

“You’re always scared. Yah–Fatty!”

“I got the conch,” said Piggy bleakly. He turned to Ralph. “I got the

conch, ain’t I Ralph?”

Unwillingly Ralph turned away from the splendid, awful sight.

“What’s that?”

“The conch. I got a right to speak.”

The twins giggled together.

“We wanted smoke–”

“Now look–!”

A pall stretched for miles away from the island. All the boys except

Piggy started to giggle; presently they were shrieking with laughter.

Piggy lost his temper.

“I got the conch! Just you listen! The first thing we ought to have

made was shelters down there by the beach. It wasn’t half cold down

there in the night. But the first time Ralph says ’fire’ you goes howling

and screaming up this here mountain. Like a pack of kids!”

By now they were listening to the tirade.

“How can you expect to be rescued if you don’t put first things first and

act proper?”

He took off his glasses and made as if to put down the conch; but the sudden

motion toward it of most of the older boys changed his mind. He

tucked the shell under his arm, and crouched back on a rock.

“Then when you get here you build a bonfire that isn’t no use. Now

you been and set the whole island on fire. Won’t we look funny if the

whole island burns up? Cooked fruit, that’s what we’ll have to eat, and

roast pork. And that’s nothing to laugh at! You said Ralph was chief and

you don’t give him time to think. Then when he says something you rush

off, like, like–”

He paused for breath, and the fire growled at them.

“And that’s not all. Them kids. The little ’uns. Who took any notice of

’em? Who knows how many we got?”

Ralph took a sudden step forward.

“I told you to. I told you to get a list of names!”

“How could I,” cried Piggy indignantly, “all by myself? They waited for

two minutes, then they fell in the sea; they went into the forest; they just

scattered everywhere. How was I to know which was which?”

Ralph licked pale lips.

“Then you don’t know how many of us there ought to be?”

“How could I with them little ’uns running round like insects? Then

when you three came back, as soon as you said make a fire, they all ran

away, and I never had a chance–”

“That’s enough!” said Ralph sharply, and snatched back the conch. “If

you didn’t you didn’t.” “–then you come up here an’ pinch my specs–”

Jack turned on him.

“You shut up!”

“–and them little ’uns was wandering about down there where the fire

is. How d’you know they aren’t still there?”

Piggy stood up and pointed to the smoke and flames. A murmur rose

among the boys and died away. Something strange was happening to

Piggy, for he was gasping for breath.

“That little ’un–” gasped Piggy– “him with the mark on his face, I don’t

see him. Where is he now?”

The crowd was as silent as death.

“Him that talked about the snakes. He was down there–”

A tree exploded in the fire like a bomb. Tall swathes of creepers rose

for a moment into view, agonized, and went down again. The little boys

screamed at them.

“Snakes! Snakes! Look at the snakes!”

In the west, and unheeded, the sun lay only an inch or two above the

sea. Their faces were lit redly from beneath. Piggy fell against a rock and

clutched it with both hands.

“That little ’un that had a mark on his face–where is–he now? I tell you

I don’t see him.”

The boys looked at each other fearfully, unbelieving.

“–where is he now?”

Ralph muttered the reply as if in shame. “Perhaps he went back to the,

the–”Beneath them, on the unfriendly side of the mountain, the drum-roll

continued.