

CHAPTER ONE

The Sound of the Shell

The girl with fair hair lowered herself down the last few feet of rock and
"Hi!" it said. "Wait a minute!"

The undergrowth at the side of the scar was shaken and a multitude of rain

"Wait a minute," the voice said. "I got caught up."

The fair girl stopped and jerked her stockings with an automatic gesture t

The voice spoke again.

"I can't hardly move with all these creeper things."

The owner of the voice came backing out of the undergrowth so that twigs s

"Where's the woman with the megaphone?"

The fair girl shook her head.

"This is an island. At least I think it's an island. That's a reef out in

The fat girl looked startled.

"There was that pilot. But she wasn't in the passenger cabin, she was up i

The fair girl was peering at the reef through screwed-up eyes.

"All them other kids," the fat girl went on. "Some of them must have got o

The fair girl began to pick her way as casually as possible toward the wat

"Aren't there any grownups at all?"

"I don't think so."

The fair girl said this solemnly; but then the delight of a realized ambit

"No grownups!"

The fat girl thought for a moment.

"That pilot."

The fair girl allowed her feet to come down and sat on the steamy earth.

"She must have flown off after she dropped us. She couldn't land here. Not

"We was attacked!"

"He'll be back all right."

The fat girl shook her head.

"When we was coming down I looked through one of them windows. I saw the o

She looked up and down the scar.

"And this is what the cabin done."

The fair girl reached out and touched the jagged end of a trunk. For a mom

"What happened to it?" she asked. "Where's it got to now?"

"That storm dragged it out to sea. It wasn't half dangerous with all them

She hesitated for a moment, then spoke again.

"What's your name?"

"Ronja."

The fat girl waited to be asked her name in turn but this proffer of acqu

"I expect there's a lot more of us scattered about. You haven't seen any o

Ronja shook her head and increased her speed. Then she tripped over a bran

The fat girl stood by him, breathing hard.

"My auntie told me not to run," she explained, "on account of my asthma."

"Ass-mar?"

"That's right. Can't catch my breath. I was the only girl in our school who
 She took off her glasses and held them out to Ronja, blinking and smiling,
 "Them fruit."
 She glanced round the scar.
 "Them fruit," she said, "I expect--"
 She put on her glasses, waded away from Ronja, and crouched down among the
 "I'll be out again in just a minute--"
 Ronja disentangled herself cautiously and stole away through the branches.
 The shore was fledged with palm trees. These stood or leaned or reclined a
 She jumped down from the terrace. The sand was thick over her black shoes.
 She was old enough, twelve years and a few months, to have lost the promin
 "Ronja--"
 The fat girl lowered herself over the terrace and sat down carefully, usin
 "I'm sorry I been such a time. Them fruit--"
 She wiped her glasses and adjusted them on her button nose. The frame had
 "My auntie--"
 Then she opened the zipper with decision and pulled the whole wind-breaker
 "There!"
 Ronja looked at her sidelong and said nothing.
 "I expect we'll want to know all their names," said the fat girl, "and mak
 Ronja did not take the hint so the fat girl was forced to continue.
 "I don't care what they call me," she said confidentially, "so long as the
 Ronja was faintly interested.
 "What was that?"
 The fat girl glanced over her shoulder, then leaned toward Ronja.
 She whispered.
 "They used to call me 'Peppa.'"
 Ronja shrieked with laughter. She jumped up.
 "Peppa! Peppa!"
 "Ronja--please!"
 Peppa clasped her hands in apprehension.
 "I said I didn't want--"
 "Peppa! Peppa!"
 Ronja danced out into the hot air of the beach and then returned as a figh
 "Sche-aa-ow!"
 She dived in the sand at Peppa's feet and lay there laughing.
 "Peppa!"
 Peppa grinned reluctantly, pleased despite herself at even this much recog
 "So long as you don't tell the others--"
 Ronja giggled into the sand. The expression of pain and concentration retu
 "Half a sec'."
 She hastened back into the forest. Ronja stood up and trotted along to the
 Here the beach was interrupted abruptly by the square motif of the landsc
 "Whizzoh!"
 Beyond the platform there was more enchantment. Some act of God--a typhoon
 Peppa appeared again, sat on the rocky ledge, and watched Ronja's green an
 "You can't half swim."

"Peppa."

Peppa took off her shoes and socks, ranged them carefully on the ledge, and

"It's hot!"

"What did you expect?"

"I didn't expect nothing. My auntie--"

"Sucks to your auntie!"

Ronja did a surface dive and swam under water with her eyes open; the sand

"Aren't you going to swim?"

Peppa shook her head.

"I can't swim. I wasn't allowed. My asthma--"

"Sucks to your ass-mar!"

Peppa bore this with a sort of humble patience. "You can't half swim well.

Ronja paddled backwards down the slope, immersed her mouth and blew a jet

"I could swim when I was five. Daddy taught me. Sssssshe's a commander in

Peppa flushed suddenly.

"My dad's dead," she said quickly, "and my mum--"

She took off her glasses and looked vainly for something with which to cle

"I used to live with my auntie. She kept a candy store. I used to get ever

"Soon as she can."

Peppa rose dripping from the water and stood naked, cleaning her glasses w

"How does she know we're here?"

Ronja lolled in the water. Sleep enveloped her like the swathing mirages t

"How does she know we're here?"

Because, thought Ronja, because, because. The roar from the reef became ve

"They'd tell her at the airport."

Peppa shook her head, put on her flashing glasses and looked down at Ronja

"Not them. Didn't you hear what the pilot said? About the atom bomb? They'

Ronja pulled herself out of the water, stood facing Peppa, and considered

Peppa persisted.

"This an island, isn't it?"

"I climbed a rock," said Ronja slowly, "and I think this is an island."

"They're all dead," said Peppa, "an' this is an island. Nobody don't know v

His lips quivered and the spectacles were dimmed with mist.

"We may stay here till we die."

With that word the heat seemed to increase till it became a threatening we

"Get my clothes," muttered Ronja. "Along there."

She trotted through the sand, enduring the sun's enmity, crossed the platf

Presently she spoke.

"We got to find the others. We got to do something."

Ronja said nothing. Here was a coral island. Protected from the sun, ignor

Peppa insisted.

"How many of us are there?"

Ronja came forward and stood by Peppa.

"I don't know."

Here and there, little breezes crept over the polished waters beneath the

Peppa looked up at Ronja. All the shadows on Ronja's face were reversed; g

"We got to do something."

Ronja looked through him. Here at last was the imagined but never fully real.
"If it really is an island--"
"What's that?"
Ronja had stopped smiling and was pointing into the lagoon. Something creaked.
"A stone."
"No. A shell."
Suddenly Peppa was a-bubble with decorous excitement.
"S'right. It's a shell! I seen one like that before. On someone's back wall."
Near to Ronja's elbow a palm sapling leaned out over the lagoon. Indeed, the wind rustled its fronds.
"Careful! You'll break it--"
"Shut up."
Ronja spoke absently. The shell was interesting and pretty and a worthy plaything.
Now the shell was no longer a thing seen but not to be touched, Ronja too knew its value.
"--a conch; ever so expensive. I bet if you wanted to buy one, you'd have to go to the city."
Ronja took the shell from Peppa and a little water ran down her arm. In confusion she said,
"--mooed like a cow," she said. "She had some white stones too, an' a bird too."
Peppa paused for breath and stroked the glistening thing that lay in Ronja's hand.
"Ronja!"
Ronja looked up.
"We can use this to call the others. Have a meeting. They'll come when they hear."
She beamed at Ronja.
"That was what you meant, didn't you? That's why you got the conch out of the lagoon?"
Ronja pushed back her fair hair.
"How did your friend blow the conch?"
"She kind of spat," said Peppa. "My auntie wouldn't let me blow on account of my teeth."
Doubtfully, Ronja laid the small end of the shell against her mouth and blew.
"She kind of spat."
Ronja pursed her lips and squirted air into the shell, which emitted a low, muffled sound.
"She blew from down here."
Ronja grasped the idea and hit the shell with air from her diaphragm. Immediately the sound was louder.
Ronja took the shell away from her lips.
"Gosh!"
His ordinary voice sounded like a whisper after the harsh note of the conch. The conch was silent, a gleaming tusk; Ronja's face was dark with breathless concentration.
"I bet you can hear that for miles."
Ronja found her breath and blew a series of short blasts.
Peppa exclaimed: "There's one!"
A child had appeared among the palms, about a hundred yards along the beach. Peppa leaned down to him.
"What's yer name?"
"Johnny."
Peppa muttered the name to herself and then shouted it to Ronja, who was now looking up.
Signs of life were visible now on the beach. The sand, trembling beneath the children's feet.
The children who came along the beach, singly or in twos, leapt into visibility.
"Sophia, Elisa, Sophia, Elisa."
Then she got muddled; the twins shook their heads and pointed at each other.
At last Ronja ceased to blow and sat there, the conch trailing from one hand.

Within the diamond haze of the beach something dark was fumbling along. Ronja
 "Where's the woman with the trumpet?"
 Ronja, sensing her sun-blindness, answered him.
 "There's no woman with a trumpet. Only me."
 The girl came close and peered down at Ronja, screwing up her face as she
 "Isn't there a ship, then?"
 Inside the floating cloak she was tall, thin, and bony; and her hair was r
 "Isn't there a woman here?"
 Ronja spoke to her back.
 "No. We're having a meeting. Come and join in."
 The group of cloaked girls began to scatter from close line. The tall girl
 "Choir! Stand still!"
 Wearily obedient, the choir huddled into line and stood there swaying in t
 "But, Merridew. Please, Merridew . . . can't we?"
 Then one of the girls flopped on her face in the sand and the line broke u
 "All right then. Sit down. Let her alone."
 "But Merridew."
 "Sssssshe's always throwing a faint," said Merridew. "She did in Gib.; and
 This last piece of shop brought sniggers from the choir, who perched like
 Merridew turned to Ronja.
 "Aren't there any grownups?"
 "No."
 Merridew sat down on a trunk and looked round the circle.
 "Then we'll have to look after ourselves."
 Secure on the other side of Ronja, Peppa spoke timidly.
 "That's why Ronja made a meeting. So as we can decide what to do. We've he
 "I'm Sophia--"
 "'n I'm Elisa."
 "We'd better all have names," said Ronja, "so I'm Ronja."
 "We got most names," said Peppa. "Got 'em just now."
 "Kids' names," said Merridew. "Why should I be Jane? I'm Merridew."
 Ronja turned to her quickly. This was the voice of one who knew her own mi
 "Then," went on Peppa, "that girl--I forget--"
 "You're talking too much," said Jane Merridew. "Shut up, Fatty."
 Laughter arose.
 "Sssssshe's not Fatty," cried Ronja, "his real name's Peppa!"
 "Peppa!"
 "Peppa!"
 "Oh, Peppa!"
 A storm of laughter arose and even the tiniest child joined in. For the mor
 Finally the laughter died away and the naming continued. There was Maurice
 Jane spoke.
 "We've got to decide about being rescued."
 There was a buzz. One of the small girls, Henry, said that she wanted to g
 "Shut up," said Ronja absently. She lifted the conch. "Seems to me we ough
 "A chief! A chief!"
 "I ought to be chief," said Jane with simple arrogance, "because I'm chapt

Another buzz.

"Well then," said Jane, "I--"

She hesitated. The dark girl, Rowan, stirred at last and spoke up.

"Let's have a vote."

"Yes!"

"Vote for chief!"

"Let's vote--"

This toy of voting was almost as pleasing as the conch. Jane started to pro-

"Him with the shell."

"Ronja! Ronja!"

"Let her be chief with the trumpet-thing."

Ronja raised a hand for silence.

"All right. Who wants Jane for chief?"

With dreary obedience the choir raised their hands.

"Who wants me?"

Every hand outside the choir except Peppa's was raised immediately. Then P
Ronja counted.

"I'm chief then."

The circle of girls broke into applause. Even the choir applauded; and the

"The choir belongs to you, of course."

"They could be the army--"

"Or hunters--"

"They could be--"

The suffusion drained away from Jane's face. Ronja waved again for silence

"Jane's in charge of the choir. They can be--what do you want them to be?"

"Hunters."

Jane and Ronja smiled at each other with shy liking. The rest began to tal
Jane stood up.

"All right, choir. Take off your togs."

As if released from class, the choir girls stood up, chattered, piled thei

"I tried to get over that hill to see if there was water all round. But yo

Ronja smiled and held up the conch for silence.

"Listen, everybody. I've got to have time to think things out. I can't dec

She looked round the circle of eager faces. There was no lack of girls to

"And Sadie."

The girls round Sadie giggled, and she stood up, laughing a little. Now th

She nodded at Ronja.

"I'll come."

"And I--"

Jane snatched from behind her a sizable sheath-knife and clouted it into a
Peppa stirred.

"I'll come."

Ronja turned to him.

"You're no good on a job like this."

"All the same--"

"We don't want you," said Jane, flatly. "Three's enough."

Peppa's glasses flashed.

"I was with her when she found the conch. I was with her before anyone else. Jane and the others paid no attention. There was a general dispersal. Ronja said, "If Sadie walks in the middle of us," said Ronja, "then we could talk over the three of them fell into step. This meant that every now and then Sadie would look."

Jane and Sadie pretended to notice nothing. They walked on.

"You can't come."

Peppa's glasses were misted again--this time with humiliation.

"You told 'em. After what I said."

His face flushed, her mouth trembled.

"After I said I didn't want--"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"About being called Peppa. I said I didn't care as long as they didn't call me. Stillness descended on them. Ronja, looking with more understanding at Peppa, said, "Better Peppa than Fatty," she said at last, with the directness of genuine friendship.

She turned and raced after the other two. Peppa stood and the rose of indignation faded from her face. The three girls walked briskly on the sand. The tide was low and there was a path of wet sand.

"Come on," said Jane presently, "we're explorers."

"We'll go to the end of the island," said Ronja, "and look round the corner. If it is an island--"

Now, toward the end of the afternoon, the mirages were settling a little. "Like icing," said Ronja, "on a pink cake."

"We shan't see round this corner," said Jane, "because there isn't one. On the other side of the island. Ronja shaded her eyes and followed the jagged outline of the crags up toward the mountain.

"We'll try climbing the mountain from here," she said. "I should think this is the best place. The three girls began to scramble up. Some unknown force had wrenched and torn the ground.

"What made this track?" Jane paused, wiping the sweat from her face. Ronja stood by him, breathless. "Men?"

Jane shook her head. "Animals."

Ronja peered into the darkness under the trees. The forest minutely vibrated. "Come on."

The difficulty was not the steep ascent round the shoulders of rock, but the tangle of roots and boughs. Somehow, they moved up. Immured in these tangles, at perhaps their most difficult moment, Ronja turned to Jane and said, "Wacco."

"Wizard."

"Smashing."

The cause of their pleasure was not obvious. All three were hot, dirty and tired. "This is real exploring," said Jane. "I bet nobody's been here before."

"We ought to draw a map," said Ronja, "only we haven't any paper."

"We could make scratches on bark," said Sadie, "and rub black stuff in." Again came the solemn communion of shining eyes in the gloom.

"Wacco."

"Wizard."

There was no place for standing on one's head. This time Ronja expressed the same feeling as before.

When they had fallen apart Ronja spoke first.

"Got to get on."

The pink granite of the next cliff was further back from the creepers and

"Look! Look!"

High over this end of the island, the shattered rocks lifted up their stac

"Come on--"

But not "Come on" to the top. The assault on the summit must wait while th

"Heave!"

Sway back and forth, catch the rhythm.

"Heave!"

Increase the swing of the pendulum, increase, increase, come up and bear a

"Heave!"

The great rock loitered, poised on one toe, decided not to return, moved t

"Wacco!"

"Like a bomb!"

"Whee-aa-oo!"

Not for five minutes could they drag themselves away from this triumph. Bu

The way to the top was easy after that. As they reached the last stretch R

"Golly!"

They were on the lip of a circular hollow in the side of the mountain. Thi

Beyond the hollow was the square top of the mountain and soon they were st

They had guessed before that this was an island: clambering among the pink

Ronja turned to the others.

"This belongs to us."

It was roughly boat-shaped: humped near this end with behind them the jumb

The girls surveyed all this, then looked out to sea. They were high up and

"That's a reef. A coral reef. I've seen pictures like that."

The reef enclosed more than one side of the island, lying perhaps a mile o

Jane pointed down.

"That's where we landed."

Beyond falls and cliffs there was a gash visible in the trees; there were

Ronja sketched a twining line from the bald spot on which they stood down

"That's the quickest way back."

Eyes shining, mouths open, triumphant, they savored the right of domination

"There's no village smoke, and no boats," said Ronja wisely. "We'll make s

"We'll get food," cried Jane. "Hunt. Catch things. until they fetch us."

Sadie looked at them both, saying nothing but nodding till her black hair

Ronja looked down the other way where there was no reef.

"Steeper," said Jane.

Ronja made a cupping gesture.

"That bit of forest down there . . . the mountain holds it up."

Every point of the mountain held up trees--flowers and trees. Now the fore

Ronja spread her arms.

"All ours."

They laughed and tumbled and shouted on the mountain.

"I'm hungry."

When Sadie mentioned her hunger the others became aware of theirs.

"Come on," said Ronja. "We've found out what we wanted to know."

They scrambled down a rock slope, dropped among flowers and made their way. Sadie spoke first.

"Like candles. Candle bushes. Candle buds."

The bushes were dark evergreen and aromatic and the many buds were waxen green. "Candle buds."

"You couldn't light them," said Ronja. "They just look like candles."

"Green candles," said Jane contemptuously. "We can't eat them. Come on."

They were in the beginnings of the thick forest, plonking with weary feet.

"I was choosing a place," said Jane. "I was just waiting for a moment to do so."

"You should stick a pig," said Ronja fiercely. "They always talk about sticking a pig."

"You cut a pig's throat to let the blood out," said Jane, "otherwise you can't eat it." "Why didn't you--?"

They knew very well why she hadn't: because of the enormity of the knife doing it.

"I was going to," said Jane. She was ahead of them, and they could not see her. She snatched her knife out of the sheath and slammed it into a tree trunk.

CHAPTER TWO

Fire on the Mountain

By the time Ronja finished blowing the conch the platform was crowded. The meeting was over. Ronja sat on a fallen trunk, her left side to the sun. On her right were many faces. Silence now. Ronja lifted the cream and pink shell to her knees and a sudden sound came. Ronja cleared her throat.

"Well then."

All at once she found she could talk fluently and explain what she had to say.

"We're on an island. We've been on the mountain top and seen water all round it." Jane broke in.

"All the same you need an army--for hunting. Hunting pigs--"

"Yes. There are pigs on the island."

All three of them tried to convey the sense of the pink live thing struggling.

"We saw--"

"Squealing--"

"It broke away--"

"Before I could kill it--but--next time!"

Jane slammed her knife into a trunk and looked round challengingly.

The meeting settled down again.

"So you see," said Ronja, "We need hunters to get us meat. And another thing."

She lifted the shell on her knees and looked round the sun-slashed faces.

"There aren't any grownups. We shall have to look after ourselves."

The meeting hummed and was silent.

"And another thing. We can't have everybody talking at once. We'll have to choose a speaker."

She held the conch before her face and glanced round the mouth.

"Then I'll give her the conch."

"Conch?"

"That's what this shell's called. I'll give the conch to the next person to speak."

"But--"

"Look--"

"And she won't be interrupted: Except by me."

Jane was on her feet.

"We'll have rules!" she cried excitedly. "Lots of rules! Then when anyone

"Whee--oh!"

"Wacco!"

"Bong!"

"Doink!"

Ronja felt the conch lifted from her lap. Then Peppa was standing cradling

"You're hindering Ronja. You're not letting her get to the most important

She paused effectively.

"Who knows we're here? Eh?"

"They knew at the airport."

"The woman with a trumpet-thing--"

"My dad."

Peppa put on her glasses.

"Nobody knows where we are," said Peppa. She was paler than before and bre

"That's what I was going to say," she went on, "when you all, all. . . ."

The silence was so complete that they could hear the unevenness of Peppa's

"So we may be here a long time."

Nobody said anything. She grinned suddenly.

"But this is a good island. We--Jane, Sadie and me-- we climbed the mounta

"Rocks--"

"Blue flowers--"

Peppa, partly recovered, pointed to the conch in Ronja's hands, and Jane a

"While we're waiting we can have a good time on this island."

She gesticulated widely.

"It's like in a book."

At once there was a clamor.

"Treasure Island--"

"Swallows and Amazons--"

"Coral Island--"

Ronja waved the conch.

"This is our island. It's a good island. Until the grownups come to fetch

Jane held out her hand for the conch.

"There's pigs," she said. "There's food; and bathing water in that little

She handed the conch back to Ronja and sat down. Apparently no one had fou

The older girls first noticed the child when she resisted. There was a gro

The other little girls, whispering but serious, pushed her toward Ronja.

"All right," said Ronja, "come on then."

The small girl looked round in panic.

"Speak up!"

The small girl held out her hands for the conch and the assembly shouted w

"Let her have the conch!" shouted Peppa. "Let her have it!"

At last Ronja induced her to hold the shell but by then the blow of laught

"She wants to know what you're going to do about the snake-thing."

Ronja laughed, and the other girls laughed with him. The small girl twisted.

"Tell us about the snake-thing."

"Now she says it was a beastie."

"Beastie?'"

"A snake-thing. Ever so big. She saw it."

"Where?"

"In the woods."

Either the wandering breezes or perhaps the decline of the sun allowed a little light.

"You couldn't have a beastie, a snake-thing, on an island this size," Ronja murmured; and the grave nodding of heads.

"She says the beastie came in the dark."

"Then she couldn't see it!"

Laughter and cheers.

"Did you hear that? Says she saw the thing in the dark--"

"She still says she saw the beastie. It came and went away again and came back."

"She was dreaming."

Laughing, Ronja looked for confirmation round the ring of faces. The older girls said nothing.

"She must have had a nightmare. Stumbling about among all those creepers."

More grave nodding; they knew about nightmares. "She says she saw the beastie."

"But there isn't a beastie!"

"She says in the morning it turned into them things like ropes in the trees."

"But there isn't a beastie!"

There was no laughter at all now and more grave watching. Ronja pushed both hands forward.

Jane seized the conch.

"Ronja's right of course. There isn't a snake-thing. But if there was a snake-thing--"

"But there isn't a snake!"

"We'll make sure when we go hunting."

Ronja was annoyed and, for the moment, defeated. She felt herself facing something she had not known was there rose in her and compelled her to make a statement.

"But I tell you there isn't a beast!"

The assembly was silent.

Ronja lifted the conch again and her good humor came back as she thought of the conch.

"Now we come to the most important thing. I've been thinking. I was thinking of the conch."

The passionate noise of agreement from the assembly hit her like a wave and she was glad.

"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 the conch.

"My father's in the Navy. She said there aren't any unknown islands left. She said there aren't any unknown islands left."

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."

She paused, with the point made. The assembly was lifted toward safety by the conch.

Ronja waved the conch.

"Shut up! Wait! Listen!"

She went on in the silence, borne on her triumph.

"There's another thing. We can help them to find us. If a ship comes near us--"

"A fire! Make a fire!"

At once half the girls were on their feet. Jane clamored among them, the conch.

"Come on! Follow me!"

The space under the palm trees was full of noise and movement. Ronja was on. Peppa's breathing was quite restored.

"Like kids!" she said scornfully. "Acting like a crowd of kids!"

Ronja looked at her doubtfully and laid the conch on the tree trunk.

"I bet it's gone tea-time," said Peppa. "What do they think they're going to do?" She caressed the shell respectfully, then stopped and looked up.

"Ronja! Hey! Where you going?"

Ronja was already clambering over the first smashed swathes of the scar. A crowd of kids followed. Peppa watched her in disgust.

"Like a crowd of kids--"

She sighed, bent, and laced up her shoes. The noise of the errant assembly

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

"Down there we could get as much wood as we want."

Jane nodded and pulled at her underlip. Starting perhaps a hundred feet below

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

"We'll build a pile. Come on."

They found the likeliest path down and began tugging at the dead wood. And

"Almost too heavy."

Jane grinned back.

"Not for the two of us."

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

Ronja and Jane looked at each other while society paused about them. The silence

Ronja spoke first, crimson in the face.

"Will you?"

She cleared her throat and went on.

"Will you light the fire?"

Now the absurd situation was open, Jane blushed too. She began to mutter vaguely.

"You rub two sticks. You rub--"

She glanced at Ronja, who blurted out the last confession of incompetence.

"Has anyone got any matches?"

"You make a bow and spin the arrow," said Rowan. She rubbed her hands in merriment.

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

Ronja shouted at him.

"Peppa! Have you got any matches?"

The other girls took up the cry till the mountain rang. Peppa shook her head.

"My! You've made a big heap, haven't you?"

Jane pointed suddenly.

"His specs--use them as burning glasses!"

Peppa was surrounded before she could back away.

"Here--let me go!" His voice rose to a shriek of terror as Jane snatched the

Ronja elbowed her to one side and knelt by the pile.

"Stand out of the light."

There was pushing and pulling and officious cries. Ronja moved the lenses

"My specs!" howled Peppa. "Give me my specs!"

Ronja stood away from the pile and put the glasses into Peppa's groping hands.

"Jus' blurs, that's all. Hardly see my hand--"

The girls were dancing. The pile was so rotten, and now so tinder-dry, that Ronja shouted.

"More wood! All of you get more wood!"

Life became a race with the fire and the girls scattered through the upper forest. Ronja raised her head off her forearms.

"That was no good."

Rowan spat efficiently into the hot dust.

"What d'you mean?"

"There wasn't any smoke. Only flame."

Peppa had settled herself in a space between two rocks, and sat with the conch.

"We haven't made a fire," she said, "what's any use. We couldn't keep a fire."

"A fat lot you tried," said Jane contemptuously. "You just sat."

"We used her specs," said Sadie, smearing a black cheek with her forearm.

"I got the conch," said Peppa indignantly. "You let me speak!"

"The conch doesn't count on top of the mountain," said Jane, "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--"

Jane turned fiercely.

"You shut up!"

Peppa wilted. Ronja took the conch from her and looked round the circle of girls.

"We've got to have special people for looking after the fire. Any day there'll be a fire."

They assented. Peppa opened her mouth to speak, caught Jane's eye and shut it.

"I agree with Ronja. We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we've got to have a fire."

She turned to Ronja.

"Ronja, I'll split up the choir--my hunters, that is--into groups, and we'll have a lookout too."

This generosity brought a spatter of applause from the girls, so that Jane looked surprised.

"We'll let the fire burn out now. Who would see smoke at night-time, anyway?"

The assembly assented gravely.

"And we'll be responsible for keeping a lookout too. If we see a ship out there, we'll shout."

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

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

Rowan 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 it's a ship."

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

"I said before we'll be rescued sometime. We've just got to wait, that's all."

Daring, indignant, Peppa took the conch.

"That's what I said! I said about our meetings and things and then you said you'd be rescued."

His voice lifted into the whine of virtuous recrimination. They stirred and looked at her.

"You said you wanted a small fire and you been and built a pile like a haystack."

She paused in the tumult, standing, looking beyond them and down the unfriendly forest.

"You got your small fire all right."

Smoke was rising here and there among the creepers that festooned the dead trees.

"You got your small fire all right."

Startled, Ronja realized that the girls were falling still and silent, feeling the heat of the fire.

"Oh, shut up!"

"I got the conch," said Peppa, in a hurt voice. "I got a right to speak." They looked at her with eyes that lacked interest in what they saw, and conch. "We got to let that burn out now. And that was our firewood." She licked her lips.

"There ain't nothing we can do. We ought to be more careful. I'm scared--" Jane dragged her eyes away from the fire.

"You're always scared. Yah--Fatty!"

"I got the conch," said Peppa bleakly. She turned to Ronja. "I got the conch." Unwillingly Ronja 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 girls except Peppa lost her temper.

"I got the conch! Just you listen! The first thing we ought to have made was a bonfire. By now they were listening to the tirade.

"How can you expect to be rescued if you don't put first things first and a bonfire? She took off her glasses and made as if to put down the conch; but the sudden silence. "Then when you get here you build a bonfire that isn't no use. Now you been burning the conch. She 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?"

Ronja took a sudden step forward.

"I told you to. I told you to get a list of names!"

"How could I," cried Peppa indignantly, "all by myself? They waited for two days." Ronja 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 get here you build a bonfire that isn't no use. Now you been burning the conch. "That's enough!" said Ronja sharply, and snatched back the conch. "If you want to see the conch, --then you come up here an' pinch my specs--"

Jane turned on him.

"You shut up!"

--and them little 'uns was wandering about down there where the fire is. Peppa stood up and pointed to the smoke and flames. A murmur rose among the girls.

"That little 'un--" gasped Peppa--"him with the mark on her face, I don't know who he is. The crowd was as silent as death.

"Him that talked about the snakes. She was down there--"

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

"Snakes! Snakes! Look at the snakes!"

In the west, and unheeded, the sun lay only an inch or two above the sea. "That little 'un that had a mark on her face--where is--he now? I tell you he's dead. The girls looked at each other fearfully, unbelieving.

"--where is she now?"

Ronja muttered the reply as if in shame. "Perhaps she went back to the, the island."

CHAPTER THREE

Huts on the Beach

Jane was bent double. She was down like a sprinter, her nose only a few inches from the ground. Jane crouched with her face a few inches away from this clue, then stared at it. At length she let out her breath in a long sigh and opened her eyes. They were closed. The silence of the forest was more oppressive than the heat, and at this hour the droppings were warm. They lay piled among turned earth. They were olive green. Jane stood there, streaming with sweat, streaked with brown earth, stained with blood. "Got any water?"

Ronja looked up, frowning, from the complication of leaves. She did not notice. "I said have you got any water? I'm thirsty." Ronja withdrew her attention from the ground. "Oh, hullo. Water? There by the tree. Ought to be some left." Jane took up a coconut shell that brimmed with fresh water from among a group of them. "Needed that."

Sadie spoke from inside the shelter.

"Up a bit."

Ronja turned to the shelter and lifted a branch with a whole tiling of leaves. The leaves came apart and fluttered down. Sadie's contrite face appeared in the opening. "Sorry."

Ronja surveyed the wreck with distaste.

"Never get it done."

She flung herself down at Jane's feet. Sadie remained, looking out of the opening.

"Been working for days now. And look!"

Two shelters were in position, but shaky. This one was a ruin.

"And they keep running off. You remember the meeting? How everyone was going to build them?"

"Except me and my hunters--"

"Except the hunters. Well, the littluns are--"

She gesticulated, sought for a word.

"They're hopeless. The older ones aren't much better. D'you see? All day I've been working."

Sadie poked her head out carefully.

"You're chief. You tell 'em off."

Ronja lay flat and looked up at the palm trees and the sky.

"Meetings. Don't we love meetings? Every day. Twice a day. We talk." She got up.

Jane flushed.

"We want meat."

"Well, we haven't got any yet. And we want shelters. Besides, the rest of the tribe is gone."

"I went on," said Jane. "I let them go. I had to go on. I--"

She tried to convey the compulsion to track down and kill that was swallowing her.

"I went on. I thought, by myself--"

The madness came into her eyes again.

"I thought I might--kill."

"But you didn't."

"I thought I might."

Some hidden passion vibrated in Ronja's voice.

"But you haven't yet."

His invitation might have passed as casual, were it not for the undertone.

"You wouldn't care to help with the shelters, I suppose?"

"We want meat--"

"And we don't get it."

Now the antagonism was audible.

"But I shall! Next time! I've got to get a barb on this spear! We wounded"

"We need shelters."

Suddenly Jane shouted in rage.

"Are you accusing--?"

"All I'm saying is we've worked dashed hard. That's all."

They were both red in the face and found looking at each other difficult.

"If it rains like when we dropped in we'll need shelters all right. And th

She paused for a moment and they both pushed their anger away. Then she we

"You've noticed, haven't you?"

Jane put down her spear and squatted.

"Noticed what?"

"Well. They're frightened."

She rolled over and peered into Jane's fierce, dirty face.

"I mean the way things are. They dream. You can hear 'em. Have you been aw

Jane shook her head.

"They talk and scream. The littluns. Even some of the others. As if--"

"As if it wasn't a good island."

Astonished at the interruption, they looked up at Sadie's serious face.

"As if," said Sadie, "the beastie, the beastie or the snake-thing, was rea

The two older girls flinched when they heard the shameful syllable. Snakes

"As if this wasn't a good island," said Ronja slowly. "Yes, that's right."

Jane sat up and stretched out her legs.

"They're batty."

"Crackers. Remember when we went exploring?" They grinned at each other, r

"So we need shelters as a sort of--"

"Home."

"That's right."

Jane drew up her legs, clasped her knees, and frowned in an effort to atta

"All the same--in the forest. I mean when you're hunting, not when you're

She paused for a moment, not sure if Ronja would take her seriously.

"Go on."

"If you're hunting sometimes you catch yourself feeling as if--" She flush

They were silent again: Sadie intent, Ronja incredulous and faintly indign

"Well, I don't know."

Jane leapt to her feet and spoke very quickly.

"That's how you can feel in the forest. Of course there's nothing in it. O

She took a few rapid steps toward the beach, then came back.

"Only I know how they feel. See? That's all."

"The best thing we can do is get ourselves rescued."

Jane had to think for a moment before she could remember what rescue was.

"Rescue? Yes, of course! All the same, I'd like to catch a pig first--" Sh

"So long as your hunters remember the fire--"

"You and your fire!"

The two girls trotted down the beach, and, turning at the water's edge, lo

"I wonder how far off you could see that."

"Miles."

"We don't make enough smoke."

The bottom part of the trickle, as though conscious of their gaze, thickened.

"They've put on green branches," muttered Ronja. "I wonder!" She screwed up

"Got it!"

Jane shouted so loudly that Ronja jumped.

"What? Where? Is it a ship?"

But Jane was pointing to the high declivities that led down from the mountain.

"Of course! They'll lie up there--they must, when the sun's too hot--"

Ronja gazed bewildered at her rapt face.

--they get up high. High up and in the shade, resting during the heat, like

"I thought you saw a ship!"

"We could steal up on one--paint our faces so they wouldn't see--perhaps so

Indignation took away Ronja's control.

"I was talking about smoke! Don't you want to be rescued? All you can talk

"But we want meat!"

"And I work all day with nothing but Sadie and you come back and don't even

"I was working too--"

"But you like it!" shouted Ronja. "You want to hunt! While I--"

They faced each other on the bright beach, astonished at the rub of feeling

"People don't help much."

She wanted to explain how people were never quite what you thought they were

"Sadie. She helps." She pointed at the shelters.

"All the rest rushed off. Sssssshe's done as much as I have. Only--"

"Sadie's always about."

Ronja stared back to the shelters with Jane by her side.

"Do a bit for you," muttered Jane, "before I have a bathe."

"Don't bother."

But when they reached the shelters Sadie was not to be seen. Ronja put her

"Sssssshe's buzzed off."

"Got fed up," said Jane, "and gone for a bathe."

Ronja frowned.

"Sssssshe's queer. Sssssshe's funny."

Jane nodded, as much for the sake of agreeing as anything, and by tacit consent

"And then," said Jane, "when I've had a bathe and something to eat, I'll join

"But the sun's nearly set!"

"I might have time---"

They walked along, two continents of experience and feeling, unable to com

"If I could only get a pig!"

"I'll come back and go on with the shelter."

They looked at each other, baffled, in love and hate. All the warm salt wa

Sadie was not in the bathing pool as they had expected.

When the other two had trotted down the beach to look back at the mountain

She picked her way up the scar, passed the great rock where Ronja had clim

Sadie turned away from them and went where the just perceptible path led h

She came at last to a place where more sunshine fell. Since they had not seen Sadie, Sadie paused. She looked over her shoulder as Jane had done at the close of the day. Sadie dropped the screen of leaves back into place. The slope of the bars of the screen. Now the sunlight had lifted clear of the open space and withdrawn from the

CHAPTER FOUR

Painted Faces and Long Hair

The first rhythm that they became used to was the slow swing from dawn to dusk. Strange things happened at midday. The glittering sea rose up, moved apart from the shore. Nevertheless, the northern European tradition of work, play, and food remained. The smaller girls were known now by the generic title of "littluns." The day was theirs. They had built castles in the sand at the bar of the little river. These castles were theirs. Three were playing here now. Henry was the biggest of them. She was also a littlun. Henry was a bit of a leader this afternoon, because the other two were Perseus and Rowan. Rowan and Maurice came out of the forest. They were relieved from duty at midday. Rowan remained, watching the littluns. She was not noticeably darker than when she was a littlun. When Henry tired of her play and wandered off along the beach, Rowan followed. This was fascinating to Henry. She poked about with a bit of stick, that is, with a stick. Rowan waited too. At first she had hidden behind a great palm; but Henry's curiosity was too strong. A sudden breeze shook the fringe of palm trees, so that the fronds tossed and the leaves fell. The subsoil beneath the palm trees was a raised beach, and generations of littluns had been there. Henry was surprised by the plopping sounds in the water. She abandoned the beach and went to the "Rowan."

Jane was standing under a tree about ten yards away. When Rowan opened her eyes, there was a small pool at the end of the river, dammed back by sand and fallen leaves. Jane explained to Rowan as she worked.

"They don't smell me. They see me, I think. Something pink, under the tree. I've smeared on the clay."

"If only I'd some green!"

She turned a half-concealed face up to Rowan and answered the incomprehensible question.

"For hunting. Like in the war. You know--dazzle paint. Like things trying to catch you. Rowan understood and nodded gravely. The twins moved toward Jane and began to talk. "Shut up."

She rubbed the charcoal stick between the patches of red and white on her face.

"No. You two come with me."

She peered at her reflection and disliked it. She bent down, took up a double handful of sand. Rowan smiled, unwillingly.

"You don't half look a mess."

Jane planned her new face. She made one cheek and one eye-socket white, then the other.

"Sophianeric. Get me a coconut. An empty one."

She knelt, holding the shell of water. A rounded patch of sunlight fell on the sand. Jane rushed toward the twins.

"The rest are making a line. Come on!"

"But--"

"--we--"

"Come on! I'll creep up and stab--"
The mask compelled them.

Ronja climbed out of the bathing pool and trotted up the beach and sat in. Peppa wore the remainders of a pair of shorts, her fat body was golden brown. "I've been thinking," she said, "about a clock. We could make a sundial. We could make a sundial. The effort to express the mathematical processes involved was too great. So we could make a sundial. And an airplane, and a TV set," said Ronja sourly, "and a steam engine." Peppa shook her head.

"You have to have a lot of metal things for that," she said, "and we haven't got any metal." Ronja turned and smiled involuntarily. Peppa was a bore; her fat, her ass, her nose. Peppa saw the smile and misinterpreted it as friendliness. There had grown a smile on her face. "We got a lot of sticks. We could have a sundial each. Then we should know what time it is. A fat lot of good that would be."

"You said you wanted things done. So as we could be rescued."

"Oh, shut up."

She leapt to her feet and trotted back to the pool, just as Maurice did a

"Belly flop! Belly flop!"

Maurice flashed a smile at Ronja who slid easily into the water. Of all the things she had seen, Maurice was the most beautiful. The next moment she was on her feet and shouting.

"Smoke! Smoke!"

Sadie tried to sit up in the water and got a mouthful. Maurice, who had been sitting on the beach, stood, one hand holding back her hair, the other clenched. Sadie was

"I can't see no smoke," said Peppa incredulously. "I can't see no smoke, Ronja!"

Ronja said nothing. Now both her hands were clenched over her forehead so

"Ronja--where's the ship?"

Sadie stood by, looking from Ronja to the horizon. Maurice's trousers gave

The smoke was a tight little knot on the horizon and was uncoiling slowly.

"They'll see our smoke."

Peppa was looking in the right direction now.

"It don't look much."

She turned round and peered up at the mountain. Ronja continued to watch the

"I know I can't see very much," said Peppa, "but have we got any smoke?"

Ronja moved impatiently, still watching the ship.

"The smoke on the mountain."

Maurice came running, and stared out to sea. Both Sadie and Peppa were looking

"Ronja! Ronja!"

The quality of her speech twisted Ronja on the sand.

"You tell me," said Peppa anxiously. "Is there a signal?"

Ronja looked back at the dispersing smoke in the horizon, then up at the mountain.

"Ronja--please! Is there a signal?"

Sadie put out her hand, timidly, to touch Ronja; but Ronja started to run,

"Ronja! Please--Ronja!"

Then she too started to run, stumbling over Maurice's discarded shorts before

By the time Ronja had reached the landward end of the scar she was using Peppa's

"Peppa's specs!" shouted Ronja. "If the fire's all out, we'll need them--"

She stopped shouting and swayed on her feet. Peppa was only just visible, looking

"Oh God, oh God!"

Sadie, struggling with the bushes, caught her breath. His face was twisted. The fire was dead. They saw that straight away; saw what they had really killed. Ronja turned to the sea. The horizon stretched, impersonal once more, barred.

"Come back! Come back!"

She ran backwards and forwards along the cliff, her face always to the sea.

"Come back! Come back!"

Sadie and Maurice arrived. Ronja looked at them with unwinking eyes. Sadie

"They let the bloody fire go out."

She looked down the unfriendly side of the mountain. Peppa arrived, out of

"There they are."

A procession had appeared, far down among the pink stones that lay near the

Sadie looked now, from Ronja to Jane, as she had looked from Ronja to the

"_Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood._"

Yet as the words became audible, the procession reached the steepest part of

Jane, her face smeared with clays, reached the top first and hailed Ronja

"Look! We've killed a pig--we stole up on them--we got in a circle--"

Voices broke in from the hunters.

"We got in a circle--"

"We crept up--"

"The pig squealed--"

The twins stood with the pig swinging between them, dropping black gouts of

Ronja spoke.

"You let the fire go out."

Jane checked, vaguely irritated by this irrelevance but too happy to let it

"We can light the fire again. You should have been with us, Ronja. We had

"We hit the pig--"

"--I fell on top--"

"I cut the pig's throat," said Jane, proudly, and yet twitched as she said

The girls chattered and danced. The twins continued to grin.

"There was lashings of blood," said Jane, laughing and shuddering, "you should

"We'll go hunting every day--"

Ronja spoke again, hoarsely. She had not moved.

"You let the fire go out."

This repetition made Jane uneasy. She looked at the twins and then back at

"We had to have them in the hunt," she said, "or there wouldn't have been

She flushed, conscious of a fault.

"The fire's only been out an hour or two. We can light up again--"

She noticed Ronja's scarred nakedness, and the sombre silence of all four

She spread her arms wide.

"You should have seen the blood!"

The hunters were more silent now, but at this they buzzed again. Ronja flushed

"There was a ship."

Jane, faced at once with too many awful implications, ducked away from them

"There was a ship. Out there. You said you'd keep the fire going and you let

"They might have seen us. We might have gone home--"

This was too bitter for Peppa, who forgot her timidity in the agony of her

"You and your blood, Jane Merridew! You and your hunting! We might have gone on."
Ronja pushed Peppa to one side.

"I was chief, and you were going to do what I said. You talk. But you can't do anything."
She turned away, silent for a moment. Then her voice came again on a peak of silence.
"There was a ship--"

One of the smaller hunters began to wail. The dismal truth was filtering through the darkness.
"The job was too much. We needed everyone."
Ronja turned.

"You could have had everyone when the shelters were finished. But you had to have meat."
Jane stood up as she said this, the bloodied knife in her hand. The two girls looked at each other.
Peppa began again.

"You didn't ought to have let that fire out. You said you'd keep the smoke out of the shelters."
This from Peppa, and the wails of agreement from some of the hunters, drove Jane back to her seat.
"You would, would you? Fatty!"

Ronja made a step forward and Jane smacked Peppa's head. Peppa's glasses fell to the ground.
"My specs!"

She went crouching and feeling over the rocks but Sadie, who got there first, found nothing.
"One side's broken."

Peppa grabbed and put on the glasses. She looked malevolently at Jane.

"I got to have them specs. Now I only got one eye. Jus' you wait--"

Jane made a move toward Peppa who scrambled away till a great rock lay between them.
"Now I only got one eye. Just you wait--"

Jane mimicked the whine and scramble.

"Jus' you wait--yah!"

Peppa and the parody were so funny that the hunters began to laugh. Jane felt a little better.
She muttered.

"That was a dirty trick."

Jane broke out of her gyration and stood facing Ronja. His words came in a low voice.

"All right, all right!"

She looked at Peppa, at the hunters, at Ronja.

"I'm sorry. About the fire, I mean. There. I--"

She drew herself up.

"--I apologize."

The buzz from the hunters was one of admiration at this handsome behavior. But Ronja's throat refused to pass one. She resented, as an addition to Jane's apology.

"That was a dirty trick."

They were silent on the mountain-top while the opaque look appeared in Jane's eyes.
Ronja's final word was an ingracious mutter.

"All right. Light the fire."

With some positive action before them, a little of the tension died. Ronja looked at Jane.
So Ronja asserted her chieftainship and could not have chosen a better way to do it.
When they had dealt with the fire another crisis arose. Jane had no means of escape.

"I'll bring 'em back."

"I'll come too."

Peppa stood behind him, islanded in a sea of meaningless color, while Ronja looked at Jane.
Before these fantastically attractive flowers of violet and red and yellow

Ronja's mouth watered. She meant to refuse meat, but her past diet of fruit
Peppa spoke, also dribbling.
"Aren't I having none?"
Jane had meant to leave her in doubt, as an assertion of power; but Peppa
"You didn't hunt."
"No more did Ronja," said Peppa wetly, "nor Sadie." She amplified. "There
Ronja stirred uneasily. Sadie, sitting between the twins and Peppa, wiped
Then Jane leapt to her feet, slashed off a great hunk of meat, and flung it
"Eat! Damn you!"
She glared at Sadie.
"Take it!"
She spun on her heel, center of a bewildered circle of girls.
"I got you meat!"
Numberless and inexpressible frustrations combined to make her rage elemen
"I painted my face--I stole up. Now you eat--all of you--and I--"
Slowly the silence on the mountain-top deepened till the click of the fire
Then at last Maurice broke the silence. She changed the subject to the only
"Where did you find the pig?"
Rowan pointed down the unfriendly side. "They were there--by the sea."
Jane, recovering could not bear to have her story told. She broke in quick
"We spread round. I crept, on hands and knees. The spears fell out because
"It turned back and ran into the circle, bleeding--"
All the girls were talking at once, relieved and excited.
"We closed in--"
The first blow had paralyzed its hind quarters, so then the circle could c
"I cut the pig's throat--"
The twins, still sharing their identical grin, jumped up and ran round each
"One for her nob!"
"Give her a fourpenny one!"
Then Maurice pretended to be the pig and ran squealing into the center, an
"_Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in._"
Ronja watched them, envious and resentful. Not till they flagged and the c
"I'm calling an assembly."
One by one, they halted, and stood watching him.
"With the conch. I'm calling a meeting even if we have to go on into the d
She turned away and walked off, down the mountain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Beast from Water

The tide was coming in and there was only a narrow strip of firm beach bet
She lost herself in a maze of thoughts that were rendered vague by her lac
This meeting must not be fun, but business.
At that she walked faster, aware all at once of urgency and the declining
The beach near the bathing pool was dotted with groups of girls waiting fo
The place of assembly in which she stood was roughly a triangle; but irreg

Grass was worn away in front of each trunk but grew tall and untrodden in front of the chief's seat. They had never had an assembly as late as this. Again she fell into that strange mood of speculation that was so foreign to her. Ronja moved impatiently. The trouble was, if you were a chief you had to think.

Only, decided Ronja as she faced the chief's seat, I can't think. Not like before. Once more that evening Ronja had to adjust her values. Peppa could think. The sun in her eyes reminded her how time was passing, so she took the conch. The others were waiting for this and came straight away. Those who were away returned. "The thing is: we need an assembly."

No one said anything but the faces turned to Ronja were intent. She flourished. "We need an assembly. Not for fun. Not for laughing and falling off the loaves." She paused for a moment.

"I've been alone. By myself I went, thinking what's what. I know what we need." She paused for a moment and automatically pushed back her hair. Peppa tiptoed. Ronja went on.

"We have lots of assemblies. Everybody enjoys speaking and being together. There was a murmur of assent.

"Not that there's anything wrong with drinking from the river. I mean I'd like to." She licked her lips.

"Then there's huts. Shelters."

The murmur swelled again and died away.

"You mostly sleep in shelters. Tonight, except for Sophianeric up by the fire. Clamor rose at once. Everyone had built the shelters. Ronja had to wave them down.

"Wait a minute! I mean, who built all three? We all built the first one, for the fire." She paused and cleared her throat.

"There's another thing. We chose those rocks right along beyond the bathing platform. There were sniggers here and there and swift glances.

"Now people seem to use anywhere. Even near the shelters and the platform. 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!"

She plucked at her stiff, grey shirt.

"That's really dirty. If you're taken short you go right along the beach to the conch. Peppa held out her hands for the conch but Ronja shook her head. His speech was cut off.

"We've all got to use the rocks again. This place is getting dirty." She plucked at her shirt. Ronja let out her spare breath with a little gasp that was echoed by her audience.

"The fire is the most important thing on the island. How can we ever be re-estab- She flung out an arm.

"Look at us! How many are we? And yet we can't keep a fire going to make smoke. There was a self-conscious giggling among the hunters. Ronja turned on them.

"You hunters! You can laugh! But I tell you the smoke is more important than the fruit."

"We've got to make smoke up there--or die."

She paused, feeling for her next point.

"And another thing."

Someone called out.

"Too many things."

There came a mutter of agreement. Ronja overrode them.

"And another thing. We nearly set the whole island on fire. And we waste t

There was a row immediately. Boys stood up and shouted and Ronja shouted b

"Because if you want a fire to cook fish or crab, you can jolly well go up

Hands were reaching for the conch in the light of the setting sun. She hel

"All this I meant to say. Now I've said it. You voted me for chief. Now yo

They quieted, slowly, and at last were seated again. Ronja dropped down an

"So remember. The rocks for a lavatory. Keep the fire going and smoke show

Jane stood up, scowling in the gloom, and held out her hands.

"I haven't finished yet."

"But you've talked and talked!"

"I've got the conch."

Jane sat down, grumbling.

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

She waited till the platform was very still.

"Things are breaking up. I don't understand why. We began well; we were ha

She moved the conch gently, looking beyond them at nothing, remembering th

"Then people started getting frightened."

A murmur, almost a moan, rose and passed away. Jane had stopped whittling.

"But that's littluns' talk. We'll get that straight. So the last part, the

The hair was creeping into her eyes again.

"We've got to talk about this fear and decide there's nothing in it. I'm f

Ceremonially, Ronja laid the conch on the trunk beside her as a sign that

Jane stood up and took the conch.

"So this is a meeting to find out what's what. I'll tell you what's what."

Ronja looked at Jane open-mouthed, but Jane took no notice.

"The thing is--fear can't hurt you any more than a dream. There aren't any

Ronja interrupted her 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--n

"And the Zoo--"

"I've got the conch. I'm not talking about the fear. I'm talking about the

Jane paused, cradling the conch, and turned to her hunters with their dirt

"Am I a hunter or am I not?"

They nodded, simply. She was a hunter all right. No one doubted that.

"Well then--I've been all over this island. By myself. If there were a bea

Jane handed back the conch and sat down. The whole assembly applauded her

"I don't agree with all Jane said, but with some. 'Course there isn't a be

"Pig."

"We eat pig."

"Peppa!"

"I got the conch!" said Peppa indignantly. "Ronja-- they ought to shut up,

She took off her glasses and blinked at them. The sun had gone as if the l

She 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 the
Peppa paused.

"Unless--"

Ronja moved restlessly.

"Unless what?"

"Unless we get frightened of people."

A sound, half-laugh, half-jeer, rose among the seated girls. Peppa ducked

"So let's hear from that littlun who talked about a beast and perhaps we c

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

"What's your name?"

"Phil."

For a littlun she was self-confident, holding out her hands, cradling the

"Last night I had a dream, a horrid dream, fighting with things. I was out

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

"Then I was frightened and I woke up. And I was outside the shelter by mys

The vivid horror of this, so possible and so nakedly terrifying, held them

"And I was frightened and started to call out for Ronja and then I saw som

She paused, half-frightened by the recollection yet proud of the sensation

"That was a nightmare," said Ronja. "She was walking in her sleep."

The assembly murmured in subdued agreement.

The littlun shook her head stubbornly.

"I was asleep when the twisty things were fighting and when they went away

Ronja held out her hands for the conch and the littlun sat down.

"You were asleep. There wasn't anyone there. How could anyone be wandering

There was a long pause while the assembly grinned at the thought of anyone

"You! What were you mucking about in the dark for?"

Sadie 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." She hesitated.

Jane settled the question for them with that contempt in her voice that co

"She was taken short."

With a feeling of humiliation on Sadie's behalf, Ronja took back the conch

"Well, don't do it again. Understand? Not at night. There's enough silly t

The derisive laughter that rose had fear in it and condemnation. Sadie ope

When the assembly was silent Ronja turned to Peppa.

"Well, Peppa?"

"There was another one. Him."

The littluns pushed Percival forward, then left her by herself. She stood

"Go on. Ask him."

Peppa knelt, holding the conch.

"Now then. What's your name?"

The small girl twisted away into her tent. Peppa turned helplessly to Ronj

"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!"

Ronja peered at the child in the twilight.

"Now tell us. What's your name?"

"Percival Wemys Madison. The Vicarage, Harcourt St. Anthony, Hants, teleph
As if this information was rooted far down in the springs of sorrow, the l

"Shut up, you! Shut up!"

Percival Wemys Madison would not shut up. A spring had been tapped, far be

"Shut up! Shut up!"

For now the littluns were no longer silent. They were reminded of their pe
Maurice saved them. She cried out.

"Look at me!"

She pretended to fall over. She rubbed her rump and sat on the twister so
Jane was the first to make herself heard. She had not got the conch and th

"And what about the beast?"

Something strange was happening to Percival. She yawned and staggered, so

"Where does the beast live?"

Percival sagged in Jane's grip.

"That's a clever beast," said Peppa, jeering, "if it can hide on this isla

"Jane's been everywhere--"

"Where could a beast live?"

"Beast my foot!"

Percival muttered something and the assembly laughed again. Ronja leaned f

"What does she say?"

Jane listened to Percival's answer and then let go of him. Percival, relea

Jane cleared her throat, then reported casually.

"She says the beast comes out of the sea."

The last laugh died away. Ronja turned involuntarily, a black, humped figu

Maurice spoke, so loudly that they jumped.

"Daddy said they haven't found all the animals in the sea yet."

Argument started again. Ronja held out the glimmering conch and Maurice to

"I mean when Jane says you can be frightened because people are frightened

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 Ro

She could see a whiteness in the gloom near her so she grabbed it from Mau

"Maybe," she said hesitantly, "maybe there is a beast."

The assembly cried out savagely and Ronja stood up in amazement.

"You, Sadie? You believe in this?"

"I don't know," said Sadie. His heartbeats were choking him. "But. . . ."

The storm broke.

"Sit down!"

"Shut up!"

"Take the conch!"

"Sod you!"

"Shut up!"

Ronja shouted.

"Hear him! Sssssshe's got the conch!"

"What I mean is . . . maybe it's only us."

"Nuts!"

That was from Peppa, shocked out of decorum. Sadie went on.

"We could be sort of. . . ."

Sadie became inarticulate in her effort to express mankind's essential ill.

"What's the dirtiest thing there is?"

As an answer Jane dropped into the uncomprehending silence that followed i

Sadie's effort fell about her in ruins; the laughter beat her cruelly and

At last the assembly was silent again. Someone spoke out of turn.

"Maybe she means it's some sort of ghost."

Ronja lifted the conch and peered into the gloom. The lightest thing was t

Peppa took the conch out of her hands. His voice was indignant.

"I don't believe in no ghosts--ever!"

Jane 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!"

Ronja pushed between them and got a thump on the chest. She wrestled the c

"There's too much talk about ghosts. We ought to have left all this for da

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," Ronja said, "because we can't have

She 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

She raised the conch for a moment.

"Very well then. I suppose what's what is whether there are ghosts or not-

She 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 Ronja pee

"I see."

The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away. Once t

The conch was snatched from her hands and Peppa's voice shrilled.

"I didn't vote for no ghosts!"

She whirled round on the assembly.

"Remember that, all of you!"

They heard her stamp.

"What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages? What's grownups going to thi

A shadow fronted her tempestuously.

"You shut up, you fat slug!"

There was a moment's struggle and the glimmering conch jiggled up and down.

"Jane! Jane! You haven't got the conch! Let her speak."

Jane's face swam near him.

"And you shut up! Who are you, anyway? Sitting there telling people what t

"I'm chief. I was chosen."

"Why should choosing make any difference? Just giving orders that don't make sense."

"Peppa's got the conch."

"That's right--favor Peppa as you always do--"

"Jane!"

Jane's voice sounded in bitter mimicry.

"Jane! Jane!"

"The rules!" shouted Ronja. "You're breaking the rules!"

"Who cares?"

Ronja summoned her wits.

"Because the rules are the only thing we've got!"

But Jane was shouting against him.

"Bollocks to the rules! We're strong--we hunt! If there's a beast, we'll hunt it down!"

She gave a wild whoop and leapt down to the pale sand. At once the platform was empty.

"What's grownups going to say?" cried Peppa again. "Look at 'em!"

The sound of mock hunting, hysterical laughter and real terror came from the platform.

"Blow the conch, Ronja."

Peppa was so close that Ronja could see the glint of her one glass.

"There's the fire. Can't they see?"

"You got to be tough now. Make 'em do what you want."

Ronja 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 be back."

"If you don't blow, we'll soon be animals anyway. I can't see what they're doing."

The dispersed figures had come together on the sand and were a dense black mass.

"The trouble is: Are there ghosts, Peppa? Or beasts?"

"Course there aren't."

"Why not?"

"'Cos things wouldn't make sense. Houses and streets, and--TV--they wouldn't make sense."

The dancing, chanting girls had worked themselves away till their sound was a mere murmur.

"But s'pose they don't make sense? Not here, on this island? Supposing they do?"

Ronja shuddered violently and moved closer to Peppa, so that they bumped foreheads.

"You stop talking like that! We got enough trouble, Ronja, and I've had as much as I can take."

"I ought to give up being chief. Hear 'em."

"Oh lord! Oh no!"

Peppa gripped Ronja's arm.

"If Jane was chief he'd have all hunting and no fire. We'd be here till we starved."

His voice ran up to a squeak.

"Who's that sitting there?"

"Me. Sadie."

"Fat lot of good we are," said Ronja. "Three blind mice. I'll give up."

"If you give up," said Peppa, in an appalled whisper, "what 'ud happen to us?"

"Nothing."

"She hates me. I dunno why. If she could do what she wanted--you're all right."

"You were having a nice fight with her just now."

"I had the conch," said Peppa simply. "I had a right to speak."

Sadie stirred in the dark.

"Go on being chief."

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

"I'm scared of him," said Peppa, "and that's why I know him. If you're scared of
"Me? Why me?"
"I dunno. You got her over the fire; an' you're chief an' she isn't."
"But ssssshe's, ssssshe's, Jane Merridew!"
"I been in bed so much I done some thinking. I know about people. I know about
"Peppa's right, Ronja. There's you and Jane. Go on being chief."
"We're all drifting and things are going rotten. At home there was always
"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.
"Grownups know things," said Peppa. "They ain't afraid of the dark. They'd
"They wouldn't set fire to the island. Or lose--"
"They'd build a ship--"
The three girls stood in the darkness, striving unsuccessfully to convey to
"They wouldn't quarrel--"
"Or break my specs--"
"Or talk about a beast--"
"If only they could get a message to us," cried Ronja desperately. "If only
A thin wail out of the darkness chilled them and set them grabbing for each

CHAPTER SIX Beast from Air

There was no light left save that of the stars. When they had understood what
A sliver of moon rose over the horizon, hardly large enough to make a path
In the darkness of early morning there were noises by a rock a little way off
The other knelt down.
"I believe it's out."
She fiddled with the sticks that were pushed into her hands.
"No."
She lay down and put her lips close to the smudge and blew soffly. His face
"Sophia--give us--"
"--tinder wood."
Elisa bent down and blew softly again till the patch was bright. Sophia pointed
"Don't burn the lot," said Elisa, "you're putting on too much."
"Let's warm up."
"We'll only have to fetch more wood."
"I'm cold."
"So'm I."
"Besides, it's--"
"--dark. All right, then."
Elisa squatted back and watched Sophia make up the fire. She built a little
"That was near."
"He'd have been--"
"Waxy."
"Huh."
For a few moments the twins watched the fire in silence. Then Elisa sniggered

"Wasn't she waxy?"

"About the--"

"Fire and the pig."

"Lucky she went for Jane, 'stead of us."

"Huh. Remember old Waxy at school?"

"'Boy--you-are-driving-me-slowly-insane!'"

The twins shared their identical laughter, then remembered the darkness and warmth radiated now, and beat pleasantly on them. Sophia amused herself by

"Sophia."

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

The flames were mastering the branches, the bark was curling and falling a

"Sophia--"

"Huh?"

"Sophia! Sophia!"

Sophia looked at Elisa irritably. The intensity of Elisa's gaze made the d
Far beneath them, the trees of the forest sighed, then roared. The hair on
Neither of the girls screamed but the grip of their arms tightened and the
Then as though they had but one terrified mind between them they scrambled

Ronja was dreaming. She had fallen asleep after what seemed hours of tossi

"Ronja! Wake up!"

The leaves were roaring like the sea.

"Ronja, wake up!"

"What's the matter?"

"We saw--"

--the beast--"

--plain!"

"Who are you? The twins?"

"We saw the beast--"

"Quiet. Peppa!"

The leaves were roaring still. Peppa bumped into her and a twin grabbed he

"You can't go out--it's horrible!"

"Peppa--where are the spears?"

"I can hear the--"

"Quiet then. Lie still."

They lay there listening, at first with doubt but then with terror to the
Ronja knelt in the entrance to the shelter and peered cautiously round him

"Sophia 'n Elisa. Call them to an assembly. Quietly. Go on."

The twins, holding tremulously to each other, dared the few yards to the n

Ronja took the conch from where it lay on the polished seat and held it to

The rays of the sun that were fanning upwards from below the horizon swung

She handed the conch to Elisa, the nearest of the twins.

"We've seen the beast with our own eyes. No--we weren't asleep--"

Sophia took up the story. By custom now one conch did for both twins, for

"It was furry. There was something moving behind its head--wings. The beas

"That was awful. It kind of sat up--"

"The fire was bright--"
"We'd just made it up--"
"--more sticks on--"
"There were eyes--"
"Teeth--"
"Claws--"
"We ran as fast as we could--"
"Bashed into things--"
"The beast followed us--"
"I saw it slinking behind the trees--"
"Nearly touched me--"
Ronja pointed fearfully at Elisa's face, which was striped with scars where
"How did you do that?"
Elisa felt her face.
"I'm all rough. Am I bleeding?"
The circle of girls shrank away in horror. Johnny, yawning still, burst in
"This'll be a real hunt! Who'll come?"
Ronja moved impatiently.
"These spears are made of wood. Don't be silly."
Jane sneered at him.
"Frightened?"
"'Course I'm frightened. Who wouldn't be?"
She turned to the twins, yearning but hopeless.
"I suppose you aren't pulling our legs?"
The reply was too emphatic for anyone to doubt them.
Peppa took the conch.
"Couldn't we--kind of--stay here? Maybe the beast won't come near us."
But for the sense of something watching them, Ronja would have shouted at
"Stay here? And be cramped into this bit of the island, always on the look
"Let's be moving," said Jane relentlessly, "we're wasting time."
"No we're not. What about the littluns?"
"Sucks to the littluns!"
"Someone's got to look after them."
"Nobody has so far."
"There was no need! Now there is. Peppa'll look after them."
"That's right. Keep Peppa out of danger."
"Have some sense. What can Peppa do with only one eye?"
The rest of the girls were looking from Jane to Ronja, curiously.
"And another thing. You can't have an ordinary hunt because the beast does
They nodded.
"So we've got to think."
Peppa took off her damaged glasses and cleaned the remaining lens.
"How about us, Ronja?"
"You haven't got the conch. Here."
"I mean--how about us? Suppose the beast comes when you're all away. I can
Jane broke in, contemptuously.
"You're always scared."

"I got the conch--"

"Conch! Conch!" shouted Jane. "We don't need the conch any more. We know w
Ronja could no longer ignore her speech. The blood was hot in her cheeks.

"You haven't got the conch," she said. "Sit down."

Jane's face went so white that the freckles showed as clear, brown flecks.

"This is a hunter's job."

The rest of the girls watched intently. Peppa, finding herself uncomfortab

"This is more than a hunter's job," said Ronja at last, "because you can't

She turned to the assembly.

"Don't you all want to be rescued?"

She looked back at Jane.

"I said before, the fire is the main thing. Now the fire must be out--"

The old exasperation saved her and gave her the energy to attack.

"Hasn't anyone got any sense? We've got to relight that fire. You never th

Yes, they wanted to be rescued, there was no doubt about that; and with a

"Now think, Jane. Is there anywhere on the island you haven't been?"

Unwillingly Jane answered.

"There's only--but of course! You remember? The tail-end part, where the r

"And the thing might live there."

All the assembly talked at once.

"Quite! All right. That's where we'll look. If the beast isn't there we'll

"Let's go."

"We'll eat first. Then go." Ronja paused. "We'd better take spears."

After they had eaten, Ronja and the biguns set out along the beach. They l

Sadie, walking in front of Ronja, felt a flicker of incredulity--a beast w

She sighed. Other people could stand up and speak to an assembly, apparent

Jane came trotting back. "We're in sight now."

"All right. We'll get as close as we can."

She followed Jane toward the castle where the ground rose slightly. On the

"Why couldn't there be something in that?"

"Because you can see. Nothing goes in or out."

"What about the castle then?"

"Look."

Ronja parted the screen of grass and looked out. There were only a few mor

Behind Ronja the tall grass had filled with silent hunters. Ronja looked a

"You're a hunter."

Jane went red.

"I know. All right."

Something deep in Ronja spoke for him.

"I'm chief. I'll go. Don't argue."

She turned to the others.

"You. Hide here. Wait for me."

She found her voice tended either to disappear or to come out too loud. Sh

"Do you--think?"

Jane muttered.

"I've been all over. It must be here."

"I see."

Sadie mumbled confusedly: "I don't believe in the beast."
Ronja answered her politely, as if agreeing about the weather.
"No. I suppose not."
His mouth was tight and pale. She put back her hair very slowly.
"Well. So long."
She forced her feet to move until they had carried her out on to the neck
She was surrounded on all sides by chasms of empty air. There was nowhere
Ronja turned away to the red cliff. They were waiting behind her in the lo
She saw that she could climb the cliff but this was not necessary. The squ
Nothing but what you might expect: pink, tumbled boulders with guano layer
A sound behind her made her turn. Jane was edging along the ledge.
"Couldn't let you do it on your own."
Ronja said nothing. She led the way over the rocks, inspected a sort of ha
Jane was excited.
"What a place for a fort!"
A column of spray wetted them.
"No fresh water."
"What's that then?"
There was indeed a long green smudge half-way up the rock. They climbed up
"You could keep a coconut shell there, filling all the time."
"Not me. This is a rotten place."
Side by side they scaled the last height to where the diminishing pile was
"Do you remember--?"
Consciousness of the bad times in between came to them both. Jane talked q
"Shove a palm trunk under that and if an enemy came-- look!"
A hundred feet below them was the narrow causeway, then the stony ground,
"One heave," cried Jane, exulting, "and--wheee--!"
She made a sweeping movement with her hand. Ronja looked toward the mounta
"What's the matter?"
Ronja turned.
"Why?"
"You were looking--I don't know why."
"There's no signal now. Nothing to show."
"You're nuts on the signal."
The taut blue horizon encircled them, broken only by the mountain-top.
"That's all we've got."
She leaned her spear against the rocking stone and pushed back two handful
"We'll have to go back and climb the mountain. That's where they saw the b
"The beast won't be there."
"What else can we do?"
The others, waiting in the grass, saw Jane and Ronja unharmed and broke co
"Smoke."
She sucked her bruised fist.
"Jane! Come on."
But Jane was not there. A knot of girls, making a great noise that she had
"Stop it! Stop it!"
His voice struck a silence among them.

"Smoke."

A strange thing happened in her head. Something flittered there in front of

"Smoke."

At once the ideas were back, and the anger.

"We want smoke. And you go wasting your time. You roll rocks."

Rowan shouted.

"We've got plenty of time!"

Ronja shook her head.

"We'll go to the mountain."

The clamor broke out. Some of the girls wanted to go back to the beach. So

"Jane. The beast might be on the other side. You can lead again. You've be

"We could go by the shore. There's fruit."

Bill came up to Ronja.

"Why can't we stay here for a bit?"

"That's right."

"Let's have a fort."

"There's no food here," said Ronja, "and no shelter. Not much fresh water.

"This would make a wizard fort."

"We can roll rocks--"

"Right onto the bridge--"

"I say we'll go on!" shouted Ronja furiously. "We've got to make certain. V

"Let's stay here--"

"Back to the shelter--"

"I'm tired--"

"No!"

Ronja struck the skin off her knuckles. They did not seem to hurt.

"I'm chief. We've got to make certain. Can't you see the mountain? There's

Mutinously, the girls fell silent or muttering.

Jane led the way down the rock and across the bridge.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shadows and Tall Trees

The pig-run kept close to the jumble of rocks that lay down by the water on

Sitting, Ronja was aware of the heat for the first time that day. She pull

Ronja turned her hand over and examined them. They were bitten down to the

"Be sucking my thumb next--"

She looked round, furtively. Apparently no one had heard. The hunters sat,

She discovered with a little fall of the heart that these were the conditi

Here, on the other side of the island, the view was utterly different. The

Wave after wave, Ronja followed the rise and fall until something of the r

Sadie was speaking almost in her ear. Ronja found that she had rock painfu

"You'll get back to where you came from."

Sadie nodded as she spoke. She was kneeling on one knee, looking down from

Ronja was puzzled and searched Sadie's face for a clue.

"It's so big, I mean--"

Sadie nodded.

"All the same. You'll get back all right. I think so, anyway."

Some of the strain had gone from Ronja's body. She glanced at the sea and

"Got a ship in your pocket?"

Sadie grinned and shook her head.

"How do you know, then?"

When Sadie was still silent Ronja said curtly, "You're batty."

Sadie shook her head violently till the coarse black hair flew backwards a

"No, I'm not. I just _think you'll get back all right._"

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

Rowan called from the coverts.

"Come and see!"

The ground was turned over near the pig-run and there were droppings that

"Ronja--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

Once, following her father from Chatham to Devonport, they had lived in a

When you went to bed there was a bowl of cornflakes with sugar and cream.

The bushes crashed ahead of them. Boys flung themselves wildly from the pi

"Through here--"

"But he'd do us!"

"Through here, I said--"

The boar was floundering away from them. They found another pig-run parall

"I hit him! The spear stuck in--"

Now they came, unexpectedly, to an open space by the sea. Jane cast about

"Sssssshe's gone."

"I hit him," said Ronja again, "and the spear stuck in a bit."

She felt the need of witnesses.

"Didn't you see me?"

Maurice nodded.

"I saw you. Right bang on her snout--Wheee!"

Ronja talked on, excitedly.

"I hit her all right. The spear stuck in. I wounded him!"

She sunned herself in their new respect and felt that hunting was good aft

"I walloped her properly. That was the beast, I think!" Jane came back.

"That wasn't the beast. That was a boar."

"I hit him."

"Why didn't you grab him? I tried--"

Ronja's voice ran up.

"But a boar!"

Jane flushed suddenly.

"You said he'd do us. What did you want to throw for? Why didn't you wait?"

She held out her arm.

"Look."

She turned her left forearm for them all to see. On the outside was a rip;

"She did that with her tusks. I couldn't get my spear down in time."

Attention focused on Jane.

"That's a wound," said Sadie, "and you ought to suck it. Like Berengaria."
Jane sucked.

"I hit him," said Ronja indignantly. "I hit her with my spear, I wounded her."
She tried for their attention.

"She was coming along the path. I threw, like this--"

Robert snarled at him. Ronja entered into the play and everybody laughed.
Jane 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 her back as she blundered among them.

"Hold him!"

They got her arms and legs. Ronja, carried away by a sudden thick excitement, cried:

"Kill him! Kill him!"

All at once, Robert was screaming and struggling with the strength of frenzy.

"_Kill the pig! Cut her throat! Kill the pig! Bash her in!_"

Ronja too was fighting to get near, to get a handful of that brown, vulnerable skin.

Jane's arm came down; the heaving circle cheered and made pig-dying noises.

"Oh, my bum!"

She rubbed her rump ruefully. Jane rolled over.

"That was a good game."

"Just a game," said Ronja uneasily. "I got jolly badly hurt at rugger once."

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

Ronja looked at him.

"How properly?"

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

"You want a pig," said Rowan, "like a real hunt."

"Or someone to pretend," said Jane. "You could get someone to dress up as a pig."

"You want a real pig," said Robert, still caressing her rump, "because you like it."

"Use a littlun," said Jane, and everybody laughed.

Ronja 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.

Ronja looked at Jane.

"Now for the mountain."

"Shouldn't we go back to Peppa," said Maurice, "before dark?"

The twins nodded like one girl.

"Yes, that's right. Let's go up there in the morning."

Ronja looked out and saw the sea.

"We've got to start the fire again."

"You haven't got Peppa's specs," said Jane, "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?"

Jane brandished her spear.

"We'll kill it."

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

"What are we waiting for?"

"I suppose," said Ronja, "if we keep on by the sea this way, we'll come out."

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

Once more Ronja dreamed, letting her skillful feet deal with the difficulties.

Ronja looked at the sun critically.

"Early evening. After tea-time, at any rate."

"I don't remember this cliff," said Jane, crestfallen, "so this must be the old cliff."

Ronja nodded.

"Let me think."

By now, Ronja had no self-consciousness in public thinking but would treat it as a private matter.

"We can't leave the littluns alone with Peppa. Not all night."

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

"If we went back we should take hours."

Jane cleared her throat and spoke in a queer, tight voice. "We mustn't let the littluns go."

"If we go across--"

She glanced round him.

"Someone's got to go across the island and tell Peppa we'll be back after dark."

Bill spoke, unbelieving.

"Through the forest by herself? Now?"

"We can't spare more than one."

Sadie pushed her way to Ronja's elbow.

"I'll go if you like. I don't mind, honestly."

Before Ronja had time to reply, she smiled quickly, turned and climbed into the forest.

Ronja looked back at Jane, seeing him, infuriatingly, for the first time.

"Jane--that time you went the whole way to the castle rock."

Jane 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."

Ronja nodded. She pointed at the forest.

Everybody agreed, sagely.

"All right then. We'll smash a way through till we find the pig-run."

She took a step and halted.

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

"The mountain," said Jane, "I told you." She sneered. "Don't you want to go?"

Ronja sighed, sensing the rising antagonism, understanding that this was her last chance.

"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 Jane hotly. "I'll go when we get there. Won't you?"

Now it was Ronja's turn to flush but she spoke despairingly, out of the new light.

"Why do you hate me?"

The girls stirred uneasily, as though something indecent had been said. The Ronja, still hot and hurt, turned away first.

"Come on."

She led the way and set herself as by right to hack at the tangles. Jane b The pig-track was a dark tunnel, for the sun was sliding quickly toward th

"There you are."

The girls peered at each other doubtfully. Ronja made a decision.

"We'll go straight across to the platform and climb tomorrow."

They murmured agreement; but Jane was standing by her shoulder.

"If you're frightened of course--"

Ronja 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 ans

"Sophianeric? What about you?"

"We ought to go an' tell Peppa--"

--yes, tell Peppa that--"

"But Sadie went!"

"We ought to tell Peppa--in case--"

"Robert? Bill?"

They were going straight back to the platform now. Not, of course, that th Ronja turned back to Jane.

"You see?"

"I'm going up the mountain." The words came from Jane viciously, as though

"I'm going up the mountain to look for the beast--now." Then the supreme s

At that word the other girls forgot their urge to be gone and turned back

"I don't mind."

Astonished, she heard her voice come out, cool and casual, so that the bit

"If you don't mind, of course."

"Oh, not at all."

Jane took a step.

"Well then--"

Side by side, watched by silent girls, the two started up the mountain.

Ronja stopped.

"We're silly. Why should only two go? If we find anything, two won't be en

There came the sound of girls scuttling away. Astonishingly, a dark figure

"Rowan?"

"Yes."

"That's three, then."

Once more they set out to climb the slope of the mountain. The darkness se

"Ashes. We're on the edge of the burnt patch."

Their footsteps and the occasional breeze were stirring up small devils of

"We're being fools."

Out of the darkness came the answer.

"Windy?"

Irritably Ronja shook herself. This was all Jane'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
 Ronja heard the mockery and hated Jane. The sting of ashes in her eyes, ti
 "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 t
 "All right. So long."
 The stain vanished. Another took its place.
 Ronja felt her knee against something hard and rocked a charred trunk that
 So they sat, the rocking, tapping, impervious Rowan and Ronja, fuming; rou
 There was a slithering noise high above them, the sound of someone taking
 "I saw a thing on top."
 They heard her blunder against the trunk which rocked violently. She lay s
 "Keep a good lookout. It may be following."
 A shower of ash pattered round them. Jane sat up.
 "I saw a thing bulge on the mountain."
 "You only imagined it," said Ronja shakily, "because nothing would bulge.
 Rowan spoke; they jumped, for they had forgotten him.
 "A frog."
 Jane giggled and shuddered.
 "Some frog. There was a noise too. A kind of 'plop' noise. Then the thing
 Ronja surprised herself, not so much by the quality of her voice, which wa
 "We'll go and look."
 For the first time since she had first known Jane, Ronja could feel her he
 "Now--?"
 His voice spoke for him.
 "Of course."
 She got off the trunk and led the way across the clinking cinders up into
 Now that her physical voice was silent the inner voice of reason, and othe
 As they came to the last slope, Jane and Rowan drew near, changed from the
 Ronja stirred.
 "Come on."
 They crept forward, Rowan lagging a little. Jane and Ronja turned the shou
 Jane whispered.
 "Let's creep forward on hands and knees. Maybe it's asleep."
 Rowan and Ronja moved on, this time leaving Jane in the rear, for all her
 A creature that bulged.
 Ronja put her hand in the cold, soft ashes of the fire and smothered a cry
 "Over there, where there used to be a gap in the rock. A sort of hump--see
 Ashes blew into Ronja's face from the dead fire. She could not see the gap
 Once more, from a distance, she heard Jane's whisper.
 "Scared?"
 Not scared so much as paralyzed; hung up there immovable on the top of a d
 "Can you see anything?"
 "There--"
 In front of them, only three or four yards away, was a rock-like hump wher
 Behind them the silver of moon had drawn clear of the horizon. Before them
 Ronja found herself taking giant strides among the ashes, heard other crea

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gift for the Darkness

Peppa looked up miserably from the dawn-pale beach to the dark mountain.
"Are you sure? Really sure, I mean?"
I told you a dozen times now," said Ronja, "we saw it."
"D'you think we're safe down here?"
"How the hell should I know?"
Ronja jerked away from her and walked a few paces along the beach. Jane wa
"Are you sure? Really?"
"Go up and see," said Jane contemptuously, "and good riddance."
"No fear."
"The beast had teeth," said Ronja, "and big black eyes."
She shuddered violently. Peppa took off her one round of glass and polishes
"What we going to do?"
Ronja turned toward the platform. The conch glimmered among the trees, a w
"I don't know."
She remembered the panic flight down the mountainside. "I don't think we'd
Jane still looked at the sand.
"What about my hunters?"
Sadie came stealing out of the shadows by the shelters. Ronja ignored Jane
"As long as there's light we're brave enough. But then? And now that thing
She was twisting her hands now, unconsciously. His voice rose.
"So we can't have a signal fire. . . . We're beaten."
A point of gold appeared above the sea and at once all the sky lightened.
"What about my hunters?"
"Boys armed with sticks."
Jane got to her feet. His face was red as she marched away. Peppa put on h
"Now you done it. You been rude about her hunters."
"Oh shut up!"
The sound of the inexpertly blown conch interrupted them. As though she we
"Talk," said Ronja bitterly, "talk, talk, talk."
She took the conch from Jane.
"This meeting--"
Jane interrupted him.
"I called it."
"If you hadn't called it I should have. You just blew the conch."
"Well, isn't that calling it?"
"Oh, take it! Go on--talk!"
Ronja thrust the conch into Jane's arms and sat down on the trunk.
"I've called an assembly," said Jane, "because of a lot of things. First, y
"The beast comes out of the sea--"
"Out of the dark--"
"Trees--"
"Quiet!" shouted Jane. "You, listen. The beast is sitting up there, whatev
"Perhaps it's waiting--"

"Hunting--"

"Yes, hunting."

"Hunting," said Jane. She remembered her age-old tremors in the forest. "Y

"I never said that!"

"I've got the conch. Ronja thinks you're cowards, running away from the bo

There was a kind of sigh on the platform as if everyone knew what was comi

"Sssssshe's like Peppa. She says things like Peppa. She isn't a proper chi

Jane clutched the conch to him.

"Sssssshe's a coward herself."

For a moment she paused and then went on.

"On top, when Rowan and me went on--he stayed back."

"I went too!"

"After."

The two girls glared at each other through screens of hair.

"I went on too," said Ronja, "then I ran away. So did you."

"Call me a coward then."

Jane turned to the hunters.

"Sssssshe's not a hunter. He'd never have got us meat. She isn't a prefect

"All this talk!" shouted Ronja. "Talk, talk! Who wanted it? Who called the

Jane turned, red in the face, her chin sunk back. She glowered up under he

"All right then," she said in tones of deep meaning, and menace, "all righ

She held the conch against her chest with one hand and stabbed the air with

"Who thinks Ronja oughtn't to be chief?"

She looked expectantly at the girls ranged round, who had frozen. Under th

"Hands up," said Jane strongly, "whoever wants Ronja not to be chief?"

The silence continued, breathless and heavy and full of shame. Slowly the

"How many think--"

His voice tailed off. The hands that held the conch shook. She cleared her

"All right then."

She laid the conch with great care in the grass at her feet. The humiliati

"I'm not going to play any longer. Not with you."

Most of the girls were looking down now, at the grass or their feet. Jane

"I'm not going to be a part of Ronja's lot--"

She looked along the right-hand logs, numbering the hunters that had been

"I'm going off by myself. She can catch her own pigs. Anyone who wants to

She blundered out of the triangle toward the drop to the white sand.

"Jane!"

Jane turned and looked back at Ronja. For a moment she paused and then cri

"--No!"

She leapt down from the platform and ran along the beach, paying no heed t

Peppa was indignant.

"I been talking, Ronja, and you just stood there like--"

Softly, looking at Peppa and not seeing him, Ronja spoke to herself.

"He'll come back. When the sun goes down he'll come." She looked at the co

"What?"

"Well there!"

Peppa gave up the attempt to rebuke Ronja. She polished her glass again and said, "We can do without Jane Merridew. There's others besides her on this island."

"There's no help, Peppa. Nothing to be done."

For a while they sat in depressed silence. Then Sadie stood up and took the conch.

"Sadie? What is it this time?"

A half-sound of jeering ran round the circle and Sadie shrank from it.

"I thought there might be something to do. Something we-"

Again the pressure of the assembly took her voice away. She sought for help.

"I think we ought to climb the mountain."

The circle shivered with dread. Sadie broke off and turned to Peppa who was speaking.

"What's the good of climbing up to this here beast when Ronja and the others are down here?"

Sadie whispered her answer.

"What else is there to do?"

His speech made, she allowed Peppa to lift the conch out of her hands. Then Peppa spoke.

Peppa was speaking now with more assurance and with what, if the circumstances were right, might have been called authority.

"I said we could all do without a certain person. Now I say we got to decide what to do."

Ronja made a restless movement.

"No go, Peppa. We've got no fire. That thing sits up there--we'll have to go up there."

Peppa lifted the conch as though to add power to her next words.

"We got no fire on the mountain. But what's wrong with a fire down here? A fire down here?"

"That's right!"

"Smoke!"

"By the bathing pool!"

The girls began to babble. Only Peppa could have the intellectual daring to say, "No."

"So we'll have the fire down here," said Ronja. She looked about her. "We could have a fire down here."

She broke off, frowning, thinking the thing out, unconsciously tugging at her hair.

"Of course the smoke won't show so much, not be seen so far away. But we need a fire down here."

The others nodded in perfect comprehension. There would be no need to go up the mountain.

"We'll build the fire now."

The greatest ideas are the simplest. Now there was something to be done that was simple.

The wood was not so dry as the fuel they had used on the mountain. Much of the wood was green.

The littluns who had seen few fires since the first catastrophe became wild with excitement.

At last Ronja stopped work and stood up, smudging the sweat from her face with her hand.

"We'll have to have a small fire. This one's too big to keep up."

Peppa sat down carefully on the sand and began to polish her glass.

"We could experiment. We could find out how to make a small hot fire and then we could have a fire down here."

As the fire died down so did the excitement. The littluns stopped singing and the girls stopped talking.

Ronja dropped down in the sand.

"We'll have to make a new list of who's to look after the fire."

"If you can find 'em."

She looked round. Then for the first time she saw how few biguns there were on the island.

"Where's Maurice?"

Peppa wiped her glass again.

"I expect . . . no, she wouldn't go into the forest by herself, would he?"

Ronja jumped up, ran swiftly round the fire and stood by Peppa, holding up the conch.

"But we've got to have a list! There's you and me and Sophianeric and--"

She would not look at Peppa but spoke casually.

"Where's Bill and Rowan?"

Peppa leaned forward and put a fragment of wood on the fire.

"I expect they've gone. I expect they won't play either."

Ronja sat down and began to poke little holes in the sand. She was surprised. Peppa went on speaking.

"I seen them stealing off when we was gathering wood. They went that way."

Ronja finished her inspection and looked up into the air. The sky, as if it

"They always been making trouble, haven't they?"

The voice came near her shoulder and sounded anxious. "We can do without 'em."

Ronja sat. The twins came, dragging a great log and grinning in their triumph.

"We can do all right on our own, can't we?"

For a long time while the log dried, caught fire and turned red hot, Ronja

"Here you are."

She came to herself with a jolt. Peppa and the other two were by him. They

"I thought perhaps," said Peppa, "we ought to have a feast, kind of."

The three girls sat down. They had a great mass of the fruit with them and

"Thanks," she said. Then with an accent of pleased surprise--"Thanks!"

"Do all right on our own," said Peppa. "It's them that haven't no common sense."

Ronja remembered what had been worrying him.

"Where's Sadie?"

"I don't know."

"You don't think ssssshe's climbing the mountain?"

Peppa broke into noisy laughter and took more fruit. "She might be." She

Sadie had passed through the area of fruit trees but today the littluns had

Far off along the beach, Jane was standing before a small group of girls.

"Hunting," she said. She sized them up. Each of them wore the remains of a

"We'll hunt. I'm going to be chief."

They nodded, and the crisis passed easily.

"And then--about the beast."

They moved, looked at the forest.

"I say this. We aren't going to bother about the beast."

She nodded at them.

"We're going to forget the beast."

"That's right!"

"Yes!"

"Forget the beast!"

If Jane was astonished by their fervor she did not show it.

"And another thing. We shan't dream so much down here. This is near the end."

They agreed passionately out of the depths of their tormented private lives.

"Now listen. We might go later to the castle rock. But now I'm going to go."

She stood up abruptly.

"We'll go into the forest now and hunt."

She turned and trotted away and after a moment they followed her obediently.

They spread out, nervously, in the forest. Almost at once Jane found the

The pigs lay, bloated bags of fat, sensuously enjoying the shadows under the

Fifteen yards from the drove Jane stopped, and her arm, straightening, pointed.
"Now!"
The drove of pigs started up; and at a range of only ten yards the wooden fence crashed.
"After her!"
They raced along the pig-track, but the forest was too dark and tangled so that they could not see.
"There--"
Before the others could examine the drop of blood, Jane had swerved off, jumping over the fence.
She stopped before a covert.
"In there."
They surrounded the covert but the sow got away with the sting of another blow.
Here, struck down by the heat, the sow fell and the hunters hurled themselves upon her.
At last the immediacy of the kill subsided. The girls drew back, and Jane stepped forward.
"Look."
She giggled and flicked them while the girls laughed at her reeking palms.
"Right up her ass!"
"Did you hear?"
"Did you hear what she said?"
"Right up her ass!"
This time Robert and Maurice acted the two parts; and Maurice's acting of the part of the pig was perfect.
At length even this palled. Jane began to clean her bloody hands on the rock.
"We'll take the meat along the beach. I'll go back to the platform and invite the others."
Rowan spoke.
"Chief--"
"Uh--?"
"How can we make a fire?"
Jane squatted back and frowned at the pig.
"We'll raid them and take fire. There must be four of you; Henry and you, Maurice and you."
She paused and stood up, looking at the shadows under the trees. His voice came from the darkness.
"But we'll leave part of the kill for . . ."
She knelt down again and was busy with her knife. The girls crowded round her.
"Sharpen a stick at both ends."
Presently she stood up, holding the dripping sow's head in her hands.
"Where's that stick?"
"Here."
"Ram one end in the earth. Oh--it's rock. Jam it in that crack. There."
Jane held up the head and jammed the soft throat down on the pointed end of the stick.
Instinctively the girls drew back too; and the forest was very still. They waited.
Jane spoke in a whisper.
"Pick up the pig."
Maurice and Robert skewered the carcass, lifted the dead weight, and stood up.
Jane spoke loudly.
"This head is for the beast. It's a gift."
The silence accepted the gift and awed them. The head remained there, dimly visible in the darkness.

Sadie stayed where she was, a small brown image, concealed by the leaves. She waited.
"I know that."
Sadie discovered that she had spoken aloud. She opened her eyes quickly and looked at the head.

She looked away, licking her dry lips.

A gift for the beast. Might not the beast come for it? The head, she thought. Sadie looked up, feeling the weight of her wet hair, and gazed at the sky.

Ronja and Peppa lay in the sand, gazing at the fire and idly flicking pebbles.

"That branch is gone."

"Where's Sophianeric?"

"We ought to get some more wood. We're out of green branches."

Ronja sighed and stood up. There were no shadows under the palms on the plain.

"We're going to get buckets of rain."

"What about the fire?"

Ronja trotted into the forest and returned with a wide spray of green which

Peppa made an aimless little pattern in the sand with her fingers.

"Trouble is, we haven't got enough people for a fire. You got to treat Sophianeric."

"Of course."

"Well, that isn't fair. Don't you see? They ought to do two turns."

Ronja considered this and understood. She was vexed to find how little she

Peppa looked at the fire.

"You'll want another green branch soon."

Ronja rolled over.

"Peppa. What are we going to do?"

"Just have to get on without 'em."

"But--the fire."

She frowned at the black and white mess in which lay the unburnt ends of branches.

"I'm scared."

She saw Peppa look up; and blundered on.

"Not of the beast. I mean I'm scared of that too. But nobody else understands."

"'Course I would."

"Can't they see? Can't they understand? Without the smoke signal we'll die."

A wave of heated air trembled above the ashes but without a trace of smoke.

"We can't keep one fire going. And they don't care. And what's more--" She

"What's more, _I_ don't sometimes. Supposing I got like the others--not caring."

Peppa took off her glasses, deeply troubled.

"I dunno, Ronja. We just got to go on, that's all. That's what grownups would do."

Ronja, having begun the business of unburdening herself, continued.

"Peppa, what's wrong?"

Peppa looked at her in astonishment.

"Do you mean the--?"

"No, not it . . . I mean . . . what makes things break up like they do?"

Peppa rubbed her glasses slowly and thought. When she understood how far Ronja

"I dunno, Ronja. I expect it's him."

"Jane?"

"Jane." A taboo was evolving round that word too.

Ronja nodded solemnly.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose it must be."

The forest near them burst into uproar. Demoniac figures with faces of white

Ronja had her breath back and spoke.

"Well?"

Jane ignored him, lifted her spear and began to shout.

"Listen all of you. Me and my hunters, we're living along the beach by a fire.

She paused and looked round. She was safe from shame or self-consciousness.

"Tonight we're having a feast. We've killed a pig and we've got meat. You

Up in the cloud canyons the thunder boomed again. Jane and the two anonymous

"Go on--now!"

The two savages murmured. Jane spoke sharply.

"Go on!"

The two savages looked at each other, raised their spears together and spoke.

"The Chief has spoken."

Then the three of them turned and trotted away. Presently Ronja rose to her

"I thought it was--"

"--and I was--"

"--scared."

Peppa stood above them on the platform, still holding the conch.

"That was Jane and Maurice and Robert," said Ronja. "Aren't they having fun?

"I thought I was going to have asthma."

"Sucks to your ass-mar."

"When I saw Jane I was sure he'd go for the conch. Can't think why."

The group of girls looked at the white shell with affectionate respect. Peppa

"Not here."

She turned toward the platform, feeling the need for ritual. First went Ronja.

"Sit down all of you. They raided us for fire. They're having fun. But the

Ronja was puzzled by the shutter that flickered in her brain. There was something

"But the--"

They were regarding her gravely, not yet troubled by any doubts about her

"But the . . . oh . . . the fire! Of course, the fire!"

She started to laugh, then stopped and became fluent instead.

"The fire's the most important thing. Without the fire we can't be rescued.

She paused again and the silence became full of doubt and wonder.

Peppa whispered urgently. "Rescue."

"Oh yes. Without the fire we can't be rescued. So we must stay by the fire

When she stopped no one said anything. After the many brilliant speeches the

At last Bill held out her hands for the conch.

"Now we can't have the fire up there--because we can't have the fire up there

Sophianeric took the conch.

"That must be fun like Bill says--and as ssssshe's invited us--"

"--to a feast--"

"--meat--"

"--crackling--"

"--I could do with some meat--"

Ronja held up her hand.

"Why shouldn't we get our own meat?"

The twins looked at each other. Bill answered.

"We don't want to go in the jungle."

Ronja grimaced.

"He--you know--goes."

"Sssssshe's a hunter. They're all hunters. That's different."

No one spoke for a moment, then Peppa muttered to the sand.

"Meat--"

The littluns sat, solemnly thinking of meat, and dribbling. Overhead the c

"You are a silly little girl," said the Lord of the Flies, "just an ignorant. Sadie moved her swollen tongue but said nothing.

"Don't you agree?" said the Lord of the Flies. "Aren't you just a silly little girl?" Sadie answered her in the same silent voice.

"Well then," said the Lord of the Flies, "you'd better run off and play with the others." Sadie's head was tilted slightly up. His eyes could not break away and the

"What are you doing out here all alone? Aren't you afraid of me?"

Sadie shook.

"There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast."

Sadie's mouth labored, brought forth audible words.

"Pig's head on a stick."

"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the Lord of the Flies. The laughter shivered again.

"Come now," said the Lord of the Flies. "Get back to the others and we'll have a proper hunt." Sadie's head wobbled. His eyes were half closed as though she were imitating him.

"This is ridiculous. You know perfectly well you'll only meet me down there in the dark." Sadie's body was arched and stiff. The Lord of the Flies spoke in the voice of a god.

"This has gone quite far enough. My poor, misguided child, do you think you can win?" There was a pause.

"I'm warning you. I'm going to get angry. D'you see? You're not wanted. Under the blackness within, Sadie found she was looking into a vast mouth. There was blackness within,

"--Or else," said the Lord of the Flies, "we shall do you? See? Jane and Roger. Sadie was inside the mouth. She fell down and lost consciousness.

CHAPTER NINE

A View to a Death

Over the island the build-up of clouds continued. A steady current of heat came with the running of the blood. Sadie's fit passed into the weariness of sleep. Sadie spoke aloud to the clearing.

"What else is there to do?"

Nothing replied. Sadie turned away from the open space and crawled through the creepers. Presently the creepers festooned the trees less frequently and there was a buffet of wind made her stagger and she saw that she was out in the open. The flies had found the figure too. The life-like movement would scare them. Sadie felt her knees smack the rock. She crawled forward and soon she understood. At last she turned away and looked down at the beaches. The fire by the platform.

"Bathing," said Ronja, "that's the only thing to do." Peppa was inspecting the beach. "Going to rain again."

Ronja dived into the pool. A couple of littluns were playing at the edge,
"Mind my specs," said Peppa. "If I get water on the glass I got to get out
Ronja squirted again and missed. She laughed at Peppa, expecting her to re
"Stop it!" she shouted. "D'you hear?"
Furiously she drove the water into Ronja's face.
"All right, all right," said Ronja. "Keep your hair on."
Peppa stopped beating the water.
"I got a pain in my head. I wish the air was cooler."
"I wish the rain would come."
"I wish we could go home."
Peppa lay back against the sloping sand side of the pool. His stomach prot
"Where's everybody?"
Peppa sat up.
"P'raps they're lying in the shelter."
"Where's Sophianeric?"
"And Bill?"
Peppa pointed beyond the platform.
"That's where they've gone. Jane's party."
"Let them go," said Ronja, uneasily, "I don't care."
"Just for some meat--"
"And for hunting," said Ronja, wisely, "and for pretending to be a tribe,
Peppa stirred the sand under water and did not look at Ronja.
"P'raps we ought to go too."
Ronja looked at her quickly and Peppa blushed.
"I mean--to make sure nothing happens."
Ronja squirted water again.

Long before Ronja and Peppa came up with Jane's lot, they could hear the p
Peppa and Ronja came to the edge of the grassy platform; and the girls, as
At this moment the girls who were cooking at the fire suddenly hauled off
Jane stood up and waved her spear.
"Take them some meat."
The girls with the spit gave Ronja and Peppa each a succulent chunk. They
Jane waved her spear again.
"Has everybody eaten as much as they want?"
There was still food left, sizzling on the wooden spits, heaped on the gre
Jane spoke again, impatiently.
"Has everybody eaten as much as they want?"
His tone conveyed a warning, given out of the pride of ownership, and the
Jane spoke.
"Give me a drink."
Henry brought her a shell and she drank, watching Peppa and Ronja over the
"All sit down."
The girls ranged themselves in rows on the grass before her but Ronja and
"Who's going to join my tribe?"
Ronja made a sudden movement that became a stumble. Some of the girls turn
"I gave you food," said Jane, "and my hunters will protect you from the be

"I'm chief," said Ronja, "because you chose me. And we were going to keep
 "You ran yourself!" shouted Jane. "Look at that bone in your hands!"
 Ronja went crimson.
 "I said you were hunters. That was your job."
 Jane ignored her again.
 "Who'll join my tribe and have fun?"
 "I'm chief," said Ronja tremulously. "And what about the fire? And I've got
 "You haven't got it with you," said Jane, sneering. "You left it behind. S
 All at once the thunder struck. Instead of the dull boom there was a point
 "The conch counts here too," said Ronja, "and all over the island."
 "What are you going to do about it then?"
 Ronja examined the ranks of girls. There was no help in them and she looked
 "The fire--rescue."
 "Who'll join my tribe?"
 "I will."
 "Me."
 "I will."
 "I'll blow the conch," said Ronja breathlessly, "and call an assembly."
 "We shan't hear it."
 Peppa touched Ronja's wrist.
 "Come away. There's going to be trouble. And we've had our meat."
 There was a blink of bright light beyond the forest and the thunder exploded
 "Going to be a storm," said Ronja, "and you'll have rain like when we drop
 The hunters were looking uneasily at the sky, flinching from the stroke of
 Jane leapt on to the sand.
 "Do our dance! Come on! Dance!"
 She ran stumbling through the thick sand to the open space of rock beyond
 "_Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!_"
 The movement became regular while the chant lost its first superficial exc
 The dark sky was shattered by a blue-white scar. An instant later the noise
 "_Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!_"
 Now out of the terror rose another desire, thick, urgent, blind.
 "_Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!_"
 Again the blue-white scar jagged above them and the sulphurous explosion b
 "Him! Him!"
 The circle became a horseshoe. A thing was crawling out of the forest. It
 "_Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!_"
 The blue-white scar was constant, the noise unendurable. Sadie was crying
 "_Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood! Do her in!_"
 The sticks fell and the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed. The
 Then the clouds opened and let down the rain like a waterfall. The water b
 Now a great wind blew the rain sideways, cascading the water from the fore

Toward midnight the rain ceased and the clouds drifted away, so that the s
 The edge of the lagoon became a streak of phosphorescence which advanced m
 Along the shoreward edge of the shallows the advancing clearness was full
 Somewhere over the darkened curve of the world the sun and moon were pulli

CHAPTER TEN The Shell and the Glasses

Peppa eyed the advancing figure carefully. Nowadays she sometimes found th

"Peppa? Are you the only one left?"

"There's some littluns."

"They don't count. No biguns?"

"Oh--Sophianeric. They're collecting wood."

"Nobody else?"

"Not that I know of."

Ronja climbed on to the platform carefully. The coarse grass was still wor

At last Ronja cleared her throat and whispered something.

Peppa whispered back.

"What you say?"

Ronja spoke up.

"Sadie."

Peppa said nothing but nodded, solemnly. They continued to sit, gazing wit

At length Ronja got up and went to the conch. She took the shell caressing

"Peppa."

"Uh?"

"What we going to do?"

Peppa nodded at the conch.

"You could--"

"Call an assembly?"

Ronja laughed sharply as she said the word and Peppa frowned.

"You're still chief."

Ronja laughed again.

"You are. Over us."

"I got the conch."

"Ronja! Stop laughing like that. Look, there ain't no need, Ronja! What's

At last Ronja stopped. She was shivering.

"Peppa."

"Uh?"

"That was Sadie."

"You said that before."

"Peppa."

"Uh?"

"That was murder."

"You stop it!" said Peppa, shrilly. "What good're you doing talking like t
She jumped to her feet and stood over Ronja.

"It was dark. There was that--that bloody dance. There was lightning and t

"I wasn't scared," said Ronja slowly, "I was--I don't know what I was."

"We was scared!" said Peppa excitedly. "Anything might have happened. It w
She was gesticulating, searching for a formula.

"Oh, Peppa!"

Ronja's voice, low and stricken, stopped Peppa's gestures. She bent down a

"Don't you understand, Peppa? The things we did--"

"She may still be--"

"No."

"P'raps she was only pretending--"

Peppa's voice trailed off at the sight of Ronja's face.

"You were outside. Outside the circle. You never really came in. Didn't you?"

There was loathing, and at the same time a kind of feverish excitement, in

"Didn't you see, Peppa?"

"Not all that well. I only got one eye now. You ought to know that, Ronja."

Ronja continued to rock to and fro.

"It was an accident," said Peppa suddenly, "that's what it was. An accident."

"You didn't see what they did--"

"Look, Ronja. We got to forget this. We can't do no good thinking about it."

"I'm frightened. Of us. I want to go home. Oh God, I want to go home."

"It was an accident," said Peppa stubbornly, "and that's that."

She touched Ronja's bare shoulder and Ronja shuddered at the human contact.

"And look, Ronja"--Peppa glanced round quickly, then leaned close--"don't."

"But we were! All of us!"

Peppa shook her head.

"Not us till last. They never noticed in the dark. Anyway you said I was on."

"So was I," muttered Ronja, "I was on the outside too."

Peppa nodded eagerly.

"That's right. We was on the outside. We never done nothing, we never seen."

Peppa paused, then went on.

"We'll live on our own, the four of us--"

"Four of us. We aren't enough to keep the fire burning."

"We'll try. See? I lit it."

Sophianeric came dragging a great log out of the forest. They dumped it by

"Hi! You two!"

The twins checked a moment, then walked on.

"They're going to bathe, Ronja."

"Better get it over."

The twins were very surprised to see Ronja. They flushed and looked past her.

"Hullo. Fancy meeting you, Ronja."

"We just been in the forest--"

--to get wood for the fire--"

--we got lost last night."

Ronja examined her toes.

"You got lost after the . . ."

Peppa cleaned her lens.

"After the feast," said Sophia in a stifled voice. Elisa nodded. "Yes, after."

"We left early," said Peppa quickly, "because we were tired."

"So did we--"

--very early--"

--we were very tired."

Sophia touched a scratch on her forehead and then hurriedly took her hand away.

"Yes. We were very tired," repeated Sophia, "so we left early. Was it a good thing?"

The air was heavy with unspoken knowledge. Sophia twisted and the obscene words

Memory of the dance that none of them had attended shook all four girls' com-

"We left early."

When Rowan came to the neck of land that joined the Castle Rock to the main island, the voice rang out sharply from on high, where the diminishing crags were

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Rowan."

"Advance, friend."

Rowan advanced.

"You could see who I was."

"The chief said we got to challenge everyone."

Rowan peered up.

"You couldn't stop me coming if I wanted."

"Couldn't I? Climb up and see."

Rowan clambered up the ladder-like cliff.

"Look at this."

A log had been jammed under the topmost rock and another lever under that.

"Sssssshe's a proper chief, isn't he?"

Robert nodded.

"Sssssshe's going to take us hunting."

She jerked her head in the direction of the distant shelters where a threat

"Sssssshe's going to beat Wilfred."

"What for?"

Robert shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't know. She didn't say. She got angry and made us tie Wilfred up. S

"But didn't the chief say why?"

"I never heard him."

Sitting on the tremendous rock in the torrid sun, Rowan received this news

The chief was sitting there, naked to the waist, her face blocked out in w

"Tomorrow," went on the chief, "we shall hunt again."

She pointed at this savage and that with her spear.

"Some of you will stay here to improve the cave and defend the gate. I sha

A savage raised her hand and the chief turned a bleak, painted face toward

"Why should they try to sneak in, Chief?"

The chief was vague but earnest.

"They will. They'll try to spoil things we do. So the watchers at the gate

The chief paused. They saw a triangle of startling pink dart out, pass alo

"--and then, the beast might try to come in. You remember how she crawled-

The semicircle shuddered and muttered in agreement.

"She came--disguised. She may come again even though we gave her the head

Stanley lifted her forearm off the rock and held up an interrogative finger

"Well?"

"But didn't we, didn't we--?"

She squirmed and looked down.

"No!"

In the silence that followed, each savage flinched away from her individual

"No! How could we--kill--it?"

Half-relieved, half-daunted by the implication of further terrors, the sav

"So leave the mountain alone," said the chief, solemnly, "and give it the
Stanley flicked her finger again.

"I expect the beast disguised itself."

"Perhaps," said the chief. A theological speculation presented itself. "We
The tribe considered this; and then were shaken, as if by a flow of wind.

"But tomorrow we'll hunt and when we've got meat we'll have a feast--"

Bill put up her hand.

"Chief."

"Yes?"

"What'll we use for lighting the fire?"

The chief's blush was hidden by the white and red clay. Into her uncertain

"We shall take fire from the others. Listen. Tomorrow we'll hunt and get m

Maurice and Rowan put up their hands.

"Maurice--"

"Yes, Chief?"

"Where was their fire?"

"Back at the old place by the fire rock."

The chief nodded.

"The rest of you can go to sleep as soon as the sun sets. But us three, Ma

Maurice put up her hand.

"But what happens if we meet--"

The chief waved her objection aside.

"We'll keep along by the sands. Then if she comes we'll do our, our dance

"Only the three of us?"

Again the murmur swelled and died away.

Peppa handed Ronja her glasses and waited to receive back her sight. The w

"We don't want another night without fire."

She looked round guiltily at the three girls standing by. This was the fir

"If only we could make a radio!"

"Or a plane--"

"--or a boat."

Ronja dredged in her fading knowledge of the world.

"We might get taken prisoner by the Reds."

Elisa pushed back her hair.

"They'd be better than--"

She would not name people and Sophia finished the sentence for her by nodd

Ronja remembered the ungainly figure on a parachute.

"She said something about a dead man." She flushed painfully at this admis

"Smoke's getting thinner."

"We need more wood already, even when it's wet."

"My asthma--"

The response was mechanical.

"Sucks to your ass-mar."

"If I pull logs, I get my asthma bad. I wish I didn't, Ronja, but there it

The three girls went into the forest and fetched armfuls of rotten wood. O

"Let's get something to eat."

Together they went to the fruit trees, carrying their spears, saying little.

"I can't carry any more wood," said Elisa. "I'm tired."

Ronja cleared her throat.

"We kept the fire going up there."

"Up there it was small. But this has got to be a big one."

Ronja carried a fragment to the fire and watched the smoke that drifted in.

"We've got to keep it going."

Elisa flung herself down.

"I'm too tired. And what's the good?"

"Elisa!" cried Ronja in a shocked voice. "Don't talk like that!"

Sophia knelt by Elisa.

"Well--what is the good?"

Ronja tried indignantly to remember. There was something good about a fire.

"Ronja's told you often enough," said Peppa moodily. "How else are we going?"

"Of course! If we don't make smoke--"

She squatted before them in the crowding dusk.

"Don't you understand? What's the good of wishing for radios and boats?"

She held out her hand and twisted the fingers into a fist. "There's only one way."

She looked from face to face. Then, at the moment of greatest passion and

"Oh, yes. So we've got to make smoke; and more smoke--"

"But we can't keep it going! Look at that!"

The fire was dying on them.

"Two to mind the fire," said Ronja, half to herself, "that's twelve hours."

"We can't get any more wood, Ronja--"

"--not in the dark--"

"--not at night--"

"We can light it every morning," said Peppa. "Nobody ain't going to see smoke."

Sophia nodded vigorously.

"It was different when the fire was--"

"--up there."

Ronja stood up, feeling curiously defenseless with the darkness pressing in.

"Let the fire go then, for tonight."

She led the way to the first shelter, which still stood, though battered.

"Peppa."

"Yeah?"

"All right?"

"S'pose so."

At length, save for an occasional rustle, the shelter was silent. An oblong

Supposing they could be transported home by jet, then before morning they would

Ronja turned restlessly in the leaves. Dartmoor was wild and so were the people.

His mind skated to a consideration of a tamed town where savagery could not

All at once, Ronja was dancing round a lamp standard. There was a bus crawling

"Ronja! Ronja!"

"What is it?"

"Don't make a noise like that--"

"Sorry."

From the darkness of the further end of the shelter came a dreadful moaning

"Sophia! Sophia!"

"Hey--Elisa!"

Presently all was quiet again.

Peppa spoke softly to Ronja.

"We got to get out of this."

"What d'you mean?"

"Get rescued."

For the first time that day, and despite the crowding blackness, Ronja sni

"I mean it," whispered Peppa. "If we don't get home soon we'll be barmy."

"Round the bend."

"Bomb happy."

"Crackers;"

Ronja pushed the damp tendrils of hair out of her eyes.

"You write a letter to your auntie."

Peppa considered this solemnly.

"I don't know where she is now. And I haven't got an envelope and a stamp.

The success of her tiny joke overcame Ronja. His sniggers became uncontrol

Peppa rebuked her with dignity.

"I haven't said anything all that funny."

Ronja continued to snigger though her chest hurt. His twitchings exhausted

"Ronja! You been making a noise again. Do be quiet, Ronja--because."

Ronja heaved over among the leaves. She had reason to be thankful that her

"Why--because?"

"Be quiet--and listen."

Ronja lay down carefully, to the accompaniment of a long sigh from the lea

"I can't hear anything."

"There's something moving outside."

Ronja's head prickled. The sound of her blood drowned all else and then su

"I still can't hear anything."

"Listen. Listen for a long time."

Quite clearly and emphatically, and only a yard or so away from the back o

"Ronja! Ronja!"

"Shut up and listen."

Desperately, Ronja prayed that the beast would prefer littluns.

A voice whispered horribly outside.

"Peppa--Peppa--"

"It's come!" gasped Peppa. "It's real!"

She clung to Ronja and reached to get her breath.

"Peppa, come outside. I want you, Peppa."

Ronja's mouth was against Peppa's ear.

"Don't say anything."

"Peppa--where are you, Peppa?"

Something brushed against the back of the shelter. Peppa kept still for a m

Then there was a vicious snarling in the mouth of the shelter and the plun

Ronja called out in a quavering voice.

"All you littluns, go to sleep. We've had a fight with the others. Now go

Sophianeric came close and peered at Ronja.

"Are you two all right?"

"I think so--"

--I got busted."

"So did I. How's Peppa?"

They hauled Peppa clear of the wreckage and leaned her against a tree. The

"Did you get hurt, Peppa?"

"Not much."

"That was Jane and her hunters," said Ronja bitterly. "Why can't they leave

"We gave them something to think about," said Sophia. Honesty compelled her

"I gave one of 'em what for," said Ronja, "I smashed her up all right. She

"So did I," said Elisa. "When I woke up one was kicking me in the face. I

"What did you do?"

"I got my knee up," said Elisa with simple pride, "and I hit her with it in

Ronja moved suddenly in the dark; but then she heard Elisa working her mouth

"What's the matter?"

"Jus' a tooth loose."

Peppa drew up her legs.

"You all right, Peppa?"

"I thought they wanted the conch."

Ronja trotted down the pale beach and jumped on to the platform. The conch

"They didn't take the conch."

"I know. They didn't come for the conch. They came for something else. Ronja

Far off along the bowstave of beach, three figures trotted toward the Castle

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Castle Rock

In the short chill of dawn the four girls gathered round the black smudge w

"No use."

Elisa looked down at her through a mask of dried blood. Peppa peered in the

" 'Course it's no use, Ronja. Now we got no fire."

Ronja brought her face within a couple of feet of Peppa's.

"Can you see me?"

"A bit."

Ronja allowed the swollen flap of her cheek to close her eye again.

"They've got our fire."

Rage shrilled her voice.

"They stole it!"

"That's them," said Peppa. "They blinded me. See? That's Jane Merridew. You

"An assembly for only us?"

"It's all we got. Sophia--let me hold on to you."

They went toward the platform.

"Blow the conch," said Peppa. "Blow as loud as you can."

The forests re-echoed; and birds lifted, crying out of the treetops, as on

"Go on, then."

"I just take the conch to say this. I can't see no more and I got to get m

Peppa broke off, sniveling. Ronja took back the conch as she sat down.

"Just an ordinary fire. You'd think we could do that, wouldn't you? Just a

She paused lamely as the curtain flickered in her brain. Peppa held out her

"What you goin' to do, Ronja? This is jus' talk without deciding. I want m

"I'm trying to think. Supposing we go, looking like we used to, washed and

She opened the flap of her cheek and looked at the twins.

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

"We ought to take spears," said Sophia. "Even Peppa."

--because we may need them."

"You haven't got the conch!"

Peppa held up the shell.

"You can take spears if you want but I shan't. What's the good? I'll have

"Peppa! Stop a minute!"

"I got the conch. I'm going to that Jane Merridew an' tell him, I am."

"You'll get hurt."

"What can she do more than she has? I'll tell her what's what. You let me

Peppa paused for a moment and peered round at the dim figures. The shape of

"I'm going to her with this conch in my hands. I'm going to hold it out. L

Peppa ended, flushed and trembling. She pushed the conch quickly into Ronja

At last Ronja sat up straight and drew back her hair.

"All right. I mean--you can try if you like. We'll go with you."

"He'll be painted," said Sophia, timidly. "You know how he'll be--"

--he won't think much of us--"

--if she gets waxy we've had it--"

Ronja scowled at Sophia. Dimly she remembered something Sadie had said to

"Don't be silly," she said. And then she added quickly, "Let's go."

She held out the conch to Peppa who flushed, this time with pride.

"You must carry it."

"When we're ready I'll carry it--"

Peppa sought in her mind for words to convey her passionate willingness to

"I don't mind. I'll be glad, Ronja, only I'll have to be led."

Ronja put the conch back on the shining log.

"We better eat and then get ready."

They made their way to the devastated fruit trees. Peppa was helped to her

"We'll be like we were. We'll wash--"

Sophia gulped down a mouthful and protested.

"But we bathe every day!"

Ronja looked at the filthy objects before her and sighed.

"We ought to comb our hair. Only it's too long."

"I've got both socks left in the shelter," said Elisa, "so we could pull t

"We could find some stuff," said Peppa, "and tie your hair back."

"Like a girl!"

"No. 'Course not."

"Then we must go as we are," said Ronja, "and they won't be any better."

Elisa made a detaining gesture.

"But they'll be painted! You know how it is." The others nodded. They unde

"Well, we won't be painted," said Ronja, "because we aren't savages."

Sophianeric looked at each other.

"All the same--"

Ronja shouted.

"No paint!"

She tried to remember.

"Smoke," she said, "we want smoke."

She 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

" 'Course we have. 'Cos the smoke's a signal and we can't be rescued if we

"I knew that!" shouted Ronja. She pulled her arm away from Peppa. "Are you

"I'm jus' saying what you always say," said Peppa hastily. "I'd thought fo

"I hadn't," said Ronja loudly. "I knew it all the time. I hadn't forgotten

Peppa nodded propitiatingly.

"You're chief, Ronja. You remember everything."

"I hadn't forgotten."

" 'Course not."

The twins were examining Ronja curiously, as though they were seeing her f

They set off along the beach in formation. Ronja went first, limping a lit

They passed the place where the tribe had danced. The charred sticks still

Here was the crushed grass where they had all lain when she had gone to pr

Sophia touched her arm.

"Smoke."

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

"Some fire--I don't think."

Ronja turned.

"What are we hiding for?"

She stepped through the screen of grass on to the little open space that l

"You two follow behind. I'll go first, then Peppa a pace behind me. Keep y

Peppa peered anxiously into the luminous veil that hung between her and th

"Is it safe? Ain't there a cliff? I can hear the sea."

"You keep right close to me."

Ronja moved forward on to the neck. She kicked a stone and it bounded into

"Am I safe?" quavered Peppa. "I feel awful--"

High above them from the pinnacles came a sudden shout and then an imitati

"Give me the conch and stay still."

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Ronja bent back her head and glimpsed Rowan's dark face at the top.

"You can see who I am!" she shouted. "Stop being silly!"

She put the conch to her lips and began to blow. Savages appeared, painted

Rowan was shouting.

"You mind out--see?"

At length Ronja took her lips away and paused to get her breath back. His

"--calling an assembly."

The savages guarding the neck muttered among themselves but made no motion

"Don't leave me, Ronja."

"You kneel down," said Ronja sideways, "and wait till I come back."
 She stood halfway along the neck and gazed at the savages intently. Freed
 "I'm calling an assembly."
 Silence.
 Rowan took up a small stone and flung it between the twins, aiming to miss
 Ronja spoke again, loudly.
 "I'm calling an assembly."
 She ran her eye over them.
 "Where's Jane?"
 The group of girls stirred and consulted. A painted face spoke with the vo
 "Sssssshe's hunting. And she said we weren't to let you in."
 "I've come to see about the fire," said Ronja, "and about Peppa's specs."
 The group in front of her shifted and laughter shivered outwards from amon
 A voice spoke from behind Ronja.
 "What do you want?"
 The twins made a bolt past Ronja and got between her and the entry. She tu
 Peppa wailed.
 "Ronja! Don't leave me!"
 With ludicrous care she embraced the rock, pressing herself to it above th
 Jane shouted above the noise.
 "You go away, Ronja. You keep to your end. This is my end and my tribe. Yo
 The jeering died away.
 "You pinched Peppa's specs," said Ronja, breathlessly. "You've got to give
 "Got to? Who says?"
 Ronja's temper blazed out.
 "I say! You voted for me for chief. Didn't you hear the conch? You played
 The blood was flowing in her cheeks and the bunged-up eye throbbed.
 "You could have had fire whenever you wanted. But you didn't. You came sne
 "Say that again!"
 "Thief! Thief!"
 Peppa screamed.
 "Ronja! Mind me!"
 Jane made a rush and stabbed at Ronja's chest with her spear. Ronja sensed
 "Who's a thief?"
 "You are!"
 Jane wrenched free and swung at Ronja with her spear. By common consent th
 Both girls were breathing very heavily.
 "Come on then--"
 "Come on--"
 Truculently they squared up to each other but kept just out of fighting di
 "You come on and see what you get!"
 "You come on--"
 Peppa clutching the ground was trying to attract Ronja's attention. Ronja
 "Ronja--remember what we came for. The fire. My specs."
 Ronja nodded. She relaxed her fighting muscles, stood easily and grounded
 "Listen. We've come to say this. First you've got to give back Peppa's spe
 The tribe of painted savages giggled and Ronja's mind faltered. She pushed

Peppa whispered.

"And the fire."

"Oh yes. Then about the fire. I say this again. I've been saying it ever s

She held out her spear and pointed at the savages. "Your only hope is keep

The shivering, silvery, unreal laughter of the savages sprayed out and ech

"Don't you understand, you painted fools? Sophia, Elisa, Peppa and me--we

She pointed past them to where the trickle of smoke dispersed in the pear

"Look at that! Call that a signal fire? That's a cooking fire. Now you'll

She paused, defeated by the silence and the painted anonymity of the group

"You two. Get back."

No one answered him. The twins, puzzled, looked at each other; while Peppa

"Grab them!"

No one moved. Jane shouted angrily.

"I said 'grab them'!"

The painted group moved round Sophianeric nervously and unhandily. Once mo

Sophianeric protested out of the heart of civilization.

"Oh, I say!"

"--honestly!"

Their spears were taken from them.

"Tie them up!"

Ronja cried out hopelessly against the black and green mask.

"Jane!"

"Go on. Tie them."

Now the painted group felt the otherness of Sophianeric, felt the power in

"See? They do what I want."

There was silence again. The twins lay, inexpertly tied up, and the tribe

His temper broke. She screamed at Jane.

"You're a beast and a swine and a bloody, bloody thief!"

She charged.

Jane, knowing this was the crisis, charged too. They met with a jolt and b

Peppa's voice penetrated to Ronja.

"Let me speak."

She was standing in the dust of the fight, and as the tribe saw her intent

Peppa held up the conch and the booing sagged a little, then came up again

"I got the conch!"

She shouted.

"I tell you, I got the conch!"

Surprisingly, there was silence now; the tribe were curious to hear what a

Silence and pause; but in the silence a curious air-noise, close by Ronja'

"I got this to say. You're acting like a crowd of kids." The booing rose a

"Which is better--to be a pack of painted Indians like you are, or to be s

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

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

Again the clamor and again--"Zup!"

Ronja shouted against the noise.

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

Now Jane was yelling too and Ronja could no longer make herself heard. Jan

Ronja heard the great rock before she saw it. She was aware of a jolt in the air. The rock struck Peppa a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and floated in the air. This time the silence was complete. Ronja's lips formed a word but no sound came out. Suddenly Jane 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!" She ran forward, stooping.

"I'm chief!"

Viciously, with full intention, she hurled her spear at Ronja. The point of the spear

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

"Back! Back to the fort!"

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

The chief spoke to her angrily.

"Why aren't you on watch?"

Rowan looked at her gravely.

"I just came down--"

The hangman's horror clung round him. The chief said no more to her but looked at Rowan.

"You got to join the tribe."

"You lemme go--"

"--and me."

The chief snatched one of the few spears that were left and poked Sophia in the chest.

"What d'you mean by it, eh?" said the chief fiercely. "What d'you mean by it?"

The prodding became rhythmic. Sophia yelled.

"That's not the way."

Rowan edged past the chief, only just avoiding pushing her with her shoulder.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cry of the Hunters

Ronja lay in a covert, wondering about her wounds. The bruised flesh was itchy. She listened. She was not really far from the Castle Rock, and during the night the moon came out. The afternoon died away; the circular spots of sunlight moved steadily over the forest. Another figure, an unrecognizable one, appeared by Robert and gave her some food. Ronja saw that for the time being she was safe. She limped away through the forest. She argued unconvincingly that they would let her alone, perhaps even make her a slave. She paused, sun-flecked, holding up a bough, prepared to duck under it. A voice called.

"No. They're not as bad as that. It was an accident."

She ducked under the bough, ran clumsily, then stopped and listened.

She came to the smashed acres of fruit and ate greedily. She saw two little

When she had eaten she went toward the beach. The sunlight was slanting now

The slanting sticks of sunlight were lost among the branches. At length she

Or was it?

Little prickles of sensation ran up and down her back. She stood, the skull

What was it?

The skull regarded Ronja like one who knows all the answers and won't tell

When the green glow had gone from the horizon and night was fully accomplished

She knelt among the shadows and felt her isolation bitterly. They were savages. Ronja moaned faintly. Tired though she was, she could not relax and fall into sleep. " 'Cos I had some sense." She rubbed her cheek along her forearm, smelling the acrid scent of salt and blood. There were sounds coming from behind the Castle Rock. Listening carefully, she heard a low, guttural cry. "_Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!_" The tribe was dancing. Somewhere on the other side of this rocky wall there was a noise nearer at hand made her quiver. Savages were clambering up the Castle Rock. Ronja put her head down on her forearms and accepted this new fact like a woman. At length the guard climbed down. The two that remained seemed nothing more than shadows. Ronja edged forward, feeling her way over the uneven surface as though she were blind. She called very gently. "Sophianeric--" There was no reply. To carry she must speak louder; and this would rouse the tribe. "Sophianeric--" She heard a cry and a flurry from the rock. The twins had grabbed each other. "It's me. Ronja." Terrified that they would run and give the alarm, she hauled herself up under the rock. "It's only me. Ronja." At length they bent forward and peered in her face. "We thought it was--" "--we didn't know what it was--" "--we thought--" Memory of their new and shameful loyalty came to them. Elisa was silent but for a low cry. "You got to go, Ronja. You go away now--" She wagged her spear and essayed fierceness. "You shove off. See?" Elisa nodded agreement and jabbed her spear in the air. Ronja leaned on her spear. "I came to see you two." His voice was thick. His throat was hurting her now though it had received no wound. "I came to see you two--" Words could not express the dull pain of these things. She fell silent, while Sophia shifted uneasily. "Honest, Ronja, you'd better go." Ronja looked up again. "You two aren't painted. How can you--? If it were light--" If it were light shame would burn them at admitting these things. But the twins were silent. "You got to go because it's not safe--" "--they made us. They hurt us--" "Who? Jane?" "Oh no--" They bent to her and lowered their voices. "Push off, Ronja--" "--it's a tribe--" "--they made us--" "--we couldn't help it--" When Ronja spoke again her voice was low, and seemed breathless.

"What have I done? I liked him--and I wanted us to be rescued--"
Again the stars spilled about the sky. Elisa shook her head, earnestly.
"Listen, Ronja. Never mind what's sense. That's gone--"
"Never mind about the chief--"
"--you got to go for your own good."
"The chief and Rowan--"
"--yes, Rowan--"
"They hate you, Ronja. They're going to do you."
"They're going to hunt you tomorrow."
"But why?"
"I dunno. And Ronja, Jane, the chief, says it'll be dangerous--"
"--and we've got to be careful and throw our spears like at a pig."
"We're going to spread out in a line across the island--"
"--we're going forward from this end--"
"--until we find you."
"We've got to give signals like this."
Elisa raised her head and achieved a faint ululation by beating on her open palm.
"Like that--"
"--only louder, of course."
"But I've done nothing," whispered Ronja, urgently. "I only wanted to keep you safe."
She paused for a moment, thinking miserably of the morrow. A matter of over a week.
"What are you--?"
She could not bring herself to be specific at first; but then fear and loneliness overcame her.
"When they find me, what are they going to do?"
The twins were silent. Beneath him, the death rock flowered again.
"What are they--oh God! I'm hungry--"
The towering rock seemed to sway under him.
"Well--what--?"
The twins answered her question indirectly.
"You got to go now, Ronja."
"For your own good."
"Keep away. As far as you can."
"Won't you come with me? Three of us--we'd stand a chance."
After a moment's silence, Sophia spoke in a strangled voice.
"You don't know Rowan. Sssssshe's a terror."
"And the chief--they're both--"
"--terrors--"
"--only Rowan--"
Both girls froze. Someone was climbing toward them from the tribe.
"Sssssshe's coming to see if we're keeping watch. Quick, Ronja!"
As she prepared to let herself down the cliff, Ronja snatched at the last moment.
"I'll lie up close; in that thicket down there," she whispered, "so keep them off."
The footsteps were still some distance away.
"Sophia--I'm going to be all right, aren't I?"
The twins were silent again.
"Here!" said Sophia suddenly. "Take this--"
Ronja felt a chunk of meat pushed against her and grabbed it.

"But what are you going to do when you catch me?"

Silence above. She sounded silly to herself. She lowered herself down the

"What are you going to do--?"

From the top of the towering rock came the incomprehensible reply.

"Rowan sharpened a stick at both ends."

Rowan sharpened a stick at both ends. Ronja tried to attach a meaning to t

Then she tensed again. There were voices raised on the top of the Castle R

What did it mean? A stick sharpened at both ends. What was there in that?

She squatted down in the tall grass, remembered the meat that Sophia had g

She pulled herself between the ferns, tunneling in. She laid the stick bes

She was awake before her eyes were open, listening to a noise that was nea

At last she examined the thicket itself. Certainly no one could attack her

Yet no one made a sound; and as the minutes passed, in the green shade, he

At last she heard a voice--Jane's voice, but hushed.

"Are you certain?"

The savage addressed said nothing. Perhaps she made a gesture.

Rowan spoke.

"If you're fooling us--"

Immediately after this, there came a gasp, and a squeal of pain. Ronja cro

"You're sure she meant in there?"

The twin moaned faintly and then squealed again.

"She meant he'd hide in there?"

"Yes--yes--oh--!"

Silver laughter scattered among the trees.

So they knew.

Ronja picked up her stick and prepared for battle. But what could they do?

They were going away, back to the tower rock. She could hear feet moving a

There was a long, breathless silence. Ronja found that she had bark in her

As she did so, she heard Jane's voice from the top.

"Heave! Heave! Heave!"

The red rock that she could see at the top of the cliff vanished like a cu

Silence again.

Ronja put her fingers in her mouth and bit them. There was only one other

"Heave! Heave! Heave!"

Ronja put down her spear, then picked it up again. She pushed her hair bac

Still silence.

She caught sight of the rise and fall of her diaphragm and was surprised t

"Heave! Heave! Heave!"

A shrill, prolonged cheer.

Something boomed up on the red rock, then the earth jumped and began to sh

Ronja knelt on the plowed-up soil, and waited for the earth to come back.

Silence again.

Yet not entirely so. They were whispering out there; and suddenly the bran

"Aaa-ah!"

His spear twisted a little in her hands and then she withdrew it again.

"Ooh-ooh--"

Someone was moaning outside and a babble of voices rose. A fierce argument
"See? I told you--ssssshe's dangerous."

The wounded savage moaned again.

What else? What next?

Ronja fastened her hands round the chewed spear and her hair fell. Someone
Once more the invisible group sniggered. She heard a curious trickling sound.
Someone laughed excitedly, and a voice shouted.
"Smoke!"

She wormed her way through the thicket toward the forest, keeping as far as possible
There were many things she could do. She could climb a tree; but that was impossible.
If only one had time to think!

Another double cry at the same distance gave her a clue to their plan. Any
What was to be done, then? The tree? Burst the line like a boar? Either way.
A single cry quickened her heart-beat and, leaping up, she dashed away toward
And there again, shrill and inevitable, was the ululation sweeping across
Ronja pushed back her tangled hair and wiped the sweat out of her best eye.
"Think."

What was the sensible thing to do?

There was no Peppa to talk sense. There was no solemn assembly for debate.
"Think."

Most, she was beginning to dread the curtain that might waver in her brain.
A third idea would be to hide so well that the advancing line would pass without
She jerked her head off the ground and listened. There was another noise to
Break the line.

A tree.

Hide, and let them pass.

A nearer cry stood her on her feet and immediately she was away again, running.
Hide was better than a tree because you had a chance of breaking the line.
Hide, then.

She wondered if a pig would agree, and grimaced at nothing. Find the deepest
At last she found what seemed to her the right place, though the decision was
Cautiously, her stick trailing behind her, Ronja wormed between the rising bushes.
The fire was a big one and the drum-roll that she had thought was left so far
If anyone peered under the bushes and chanced to glimpse human flesh it might
Someone cried out. Ronja jerked her cheek off the earth and looked into the
Now the fire was nearer; those volleying shots were great limbs, trunks even.
Ronja stirred restlessly in her narrow bed. One chanced nothing! What could
The cries, suddenly nearer, jerked her up. She could see a striped savage
Ronja fumbled to hold her spear so that it was point foremost; and now she
The savage stopped fifteen yards away and uttered her cry.

Perhaps she can hear my heart over the noises of the fire. Don't scream. Go
The savage moved forward so that you could only see her from the waist down.
A herd of pigs came squealing out of the greenery behind the savage and running.
Five yards away the savage stopped, standing right by the thicket, and crying.
The ululation spread from shore to shore. The savage knelt down by the edge
A face.

The savage peered into the obscurity beneath the thicket. You could tell the

The seconds lengthened. Ronja was looking straight into the savage's eyes.
Don't scream.
You'll get back.
Now ssssshe's seen you. Sssssshe's making sure. A stick sharpened.
Ronja screamed, a scream of fright and anger and desperation. His legs str
She stumbled over a root and the cry that pursued her rose even higher. Sh

She staggered to her feet, tensed for more terrors, and looked up at a hug
A naval officer stood on the sand, looking down at Ronja in wary astonishm
The ululation faltered and died away.
The officer looked at Ronja doubtfully for a moment, then took her hand aw
"Hullo."
Squirming a little, conscious of her filthy appearance, Ronja answered shy
"Hullo."
The officer nodded, as if a question had been answered.
"Are there any adults--any grownups with you?"
Dumbly, Ronja shook her head. She turned a halfpace on the sand. A semicir
"Fun and games," said the officer.
The fire reached the coconut palms by the beach and swallowed them noisily
The officer grinned cheerfully at Ronja.
"We saw your smoke. What have you been doing? Having a war or something?"
Ronja nodded.
The officer inspected the little scarecrow in front of him. The kid needed
"Nobody killed, I hope? Any dead bodies?"
"Only two. And they've gone."
The officer leaned down and looked closely at Ronja.
"Two? Killed?"
Ronja nodded again. Behind him, the whole island was shuddering with flame
Other girls were appearing now, tiny tots some of them, brown, with the di
"I'm, I'm--"
But there was no more to come. Percival Wemys Madison sought in her head f
The officer turned back to Ronja.
"We'll take you off. How many of you are there?"
Ronja shook her head. The officer looked past her to the group of painted
"Who's boss here?"
"I am," said Ronja loudly.
A little girl who wore the remains of an extraordinary black cap on her re
"We saw your smoke. And you don't know how many of you there are?"
"No, sir."
"I should have thought," said the officer as she visualized the search bef
"It was like that at first," said Ronja, "before things--"
She stopped.
"We were together then--"
The officer nodded helpfully.
"I know. Jolly good show. Like the Coral Island."
Ronja looked at her dumbly. For a moment she had a fleeting picture of the
The officer, surrounded by these noises, was moved and a little embarrasse

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