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3 Huts on the Beach

Jack was bent double. He was down like a sprinter, his nose only a few inches from the humid earth. The tree trunks and the creepers that festooned them lost themselves in a green dusk thirty feet above him, and all about was the undergrowth. There was only the faintest indication of a trail here; a cracked twig and what might be the impression of one side of a hoof. He lowered his chin and stared at the traces as though he would force them to speak to him. Then dog-like, uncomfortably on all fours yet unheeding his discomfort, he stole forward five yards and stopped. Here was loop of creeper with a tendril pendant from a node. The tendril was polished on the underside; pigs, passing through the loop, brushed it with their bristly hide.

Jack crouched with his face a few inches away from this clue, then stared forward into the semi-darkness of the undergrowth. His sandy hair, considerably longer than it had been when they dropped in, was lighter now; and his bare back was a mass of dark freckles and peeling sunburn. A sharpened stick about five feet long trailed from his right

hand, and except for a pair of tattered shorts held up by his knife-belt he was naked. He closed his eyes, raised his head and breathed in gently with flared nostrils, assessing the current of warm air for information. The forest and he were very still.

At length he let out his breath in a long sigh and opened his eyes. They were bright blue, eyes that in this frustration seemed bolting and nearly mad. He passed his tongue across dry lips and scanned the uncommunicative forest. Then again he stole forward and cast this way and that over the ground.

The silence of the forest was more oppressive than the heat, and at this hour of the day there was not even the whine of insects. Only when Jack himself roused a gaudy bird from a primitive nest of sticks was the silence shattered and echoes set ringing by a harsh cry that seemed to come out of the abyss of ages. Jack himself shrank at this cry with a hiss of indrawn breath, and for a minute became less a hunter than a furtive thing, ape-like among the tangle of trees. Then the trail, the frustration, claimed him again and he searched the ground avidly. By the trunk of a vast tree that grew pale flowers on its grey bark he checked, closed his eyes, and once more drew in the warm air; and this time his breath came short, there was even a passing pallor in his face, and then the surge of blood again. He passed like a shadow under the darkness of the tree and crouched, looking down at the trodden ground at his feet.

The droppings were warm. They lay piled among turned earth. They

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were olive green, smooth, and they steamed a little. Jack lifted his head and stared at the inscrutable masses of creeper that lay across the trail. Then he raised his spear and sneaked forward. Beyond the creeper, the trail joined a pig-run that was wide enough and trodden enough to be a path. The ground was hardened by an accustomed tread and as Jack rose to his full height he heard something moving on it. He swung back his right arm and hurled the spear with all his strength. From the pig-run came the quick, hard patter of hoofs, a castanet sound, seductive, maddening—the promise of meat. He rushed out of the undergrowth and snatched up his spear. The pattering of pig’s trotters died away in the distance.

Jack stood there, streaming with sweat, streaked with brown earth, stained by all the vicissitudes of a day’s hunting. Swearing, he turned off the trail and pushed his way through until the forest opened a little and instead of bald trunks supporting a dark roof there were light grey trunks and crowns of feathery palm. Beyond these was the glitter of the sea and he could hear voices. Ralph was standing by a contraption of palm trunks and leaves, a rude shelter that faced the lagoon and seemed very near to falling down. He did not notice when Jack spoke.

“Got any water?”

Ralph looked up, frowning, from the complication of leaves. He did not notice Jack even when he saw him.

“I said have you got any water? I’m thirsty.”

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Ralph withdrew his attention from the shelter and realized Jack with a start.

“Oh, hullo. Water? There by the tree. Ought to be some left.”

Jack took up a coconut shell that brimmed with fresh water from among a group that was arranged in the shade, and drank. The water splashed over his chin and neck and chest. He breathed noisily when he had finished.

“Needed that.”

Simon spoke from inside the shelter.

“Up a bit.”

Ralph turned to the shelter and lifted a branch with a whole tiling of leaves.

The leaves came apart and fluttered down. Simon’s contrite face appeared in the hole.

“Sorry.”

Ralph surveyed the wreck with distaste.

“Never get it done.”

He flung himself down at Jack’s feet. Simon remained, looking out of the hole in the shelter. Once down, Ralph explained.

“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 work hard until the shelters were finished?”

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“Except me and my hunters—”

“Except the hunters. Well, the littluns are—”

He gesticulated, sought for a word.

“They’re hopeless. The older ones aren’t much better. D’you see? All day I’ve been working with Simon. No one else. They’re off bathing, or eating, or playing.”

Simon poked his head out carefully.

“You’re chief. You tell ’em off.”

Ralph 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.” He got on one elbow. “I bet if I blew the conch this minute, they’d come running. Then we’d be, you know, very solemn, and someone would say we ought to build a jet, or a submarine, or a TV set. When the meeting was over they’d work for five minutes, then wander off or go hunting.”

Jack flushed.

“We want meat.”

“Well, we haven’t got any yet. And we want shelters. Besides, the rest of your hunters came back hours ago. They’ve been swimming.”

“I went on,” said Jack. “I let them go. I had to go on. I—”

He tried to convey the compulsion to track down and kill that was swallowing him up.

“I went on. I thought, by myself—”

The madness came into his eyes again.

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“I thought I might—kill.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I thought I might.”

Some hidden passion vibrated in Ralph’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 a pig and the spear fell out. If we could only make barbs—”

“We need shelters.”

Suddenly Jack 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. Ralph rolled on his stomach and began to play with the grass.

“If it rains like when we dropped in we’ll need shelters all right. And then another thing. We need shelters because of the—”

He paused for a moment and they both pushed their anger away. Then

he went on with the safe, changed subject.

“You’ve noticed, haven’t you?”

Jack put down his spear and squatted.

“Noticed what?”

“Well. They’re frightened.”

He rolled over and peered into Jack’s fierce, dirty face.

“I mean the way things are. They dream. You can hear ’em. Have you been awake at night?”

Jack shook his 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 Simon’s serious face.

“As if,” said Simon, “the beastie, the beastie or the snake-thing, was real. Remember?”

The two older boys flinched when they heard the shameful syllable. Snakes were not mentioned now, were not mentionable.

“As if this wasn’t a good island,” said Ralph slowly. “Yes, that’s right.”

Jack sat up and stretched out his legs.

“They’re batty.”

“Crackers. Remember when we went exploring?”

They grinned at each other, remembering the glamour of the first day. Ralph went on.

“So we need shelters as a sort of—”

“Home.”

“That’s right.”

Jack drew up his legs, clasped his knees, and frowned in an effort to attain clarity.

“All the same—in the forest. I mean when you’re hunting, not when you’re getting fruit, of course, but when you’re on your own—”

He paused for a moment, not sure if Ralph would take him seriously.

“Go on.”

“If you’re hunting sometimes you catch yourself feeling as if—” He flushed suddenly.

“There’s nothing in it of course. Just a feeling. But you can feel as if you’re not hunting, but—being hunted, as if something’s behind you all the time in the jungle.”

They were silent again: Simon intent, Ralph incredulous and faintly indignant. He sat up, rubbing one shoulder with a dirty hand.

“Well, I don’t know.”

Jack leapt to his feet and spoke very quickly.

“That’s how you can feel in the forest. Of course there’s nothing in it. Only—only—”

He 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.”

Jack had to think for a moment before he could remember what rescue

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was.

“Rescue? Yes, of course! All the same, I’d like to catch a pig first—” He snatched up his spear and dashed it into the ground. The opaque, mad look came into his eyes again. Ralph looked at him critically through his tangle of fair hair.

“So long as your hunters remember the fire—”

“You and your fire!”

The two boys trotted down the beach, and, turning at the water’s edge, looked back at the pink mountain. The trickle of smoke sketched a chalky line up the solid blue of the sky, wavered high up and faded. Ralph frowned.

“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 to a creamy blur which crept up the feeble column.

“They’ve put on green branches,” muttered Ralph. “I wonder!” He screwed up his eyes and swung round to search the horizon.

“Got it!”

Jack shouted so loudly that Ralph jumped.

“What? Where? Is it a ship?”

But Jack was pointing to the high declivities that led down from the mountain to the flatter part of the island.

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“Of course! They’ll lie up there—they must, when the sun’s too hot—”
Ralph gazed bewildered at his rapt face.

“—they get up high. High up and in the shade, resting during the heat, like cows at home—”

“I thought you saw a ship!”

“We could steal up on one—paint our faces so they wouldn’t see—perhaps surround them and then—”

Indignation took away Ralph’s control.

“I was talking about smoke! Don’t you want to be rescued? All you can talk about is pig, pig, pig!”

“But we want meat!”

“And I work all day with nothing but Simon and you come back and don’t even notice the huts!”

“I was working too—”

“But you like it!” shouted Ralph. “You want to hunt! While I—”

They faced each other on the bright beach, astonished at the rub of feeling. Ralph looked away first, pretending interest in a group of littluns on the sand. From beyond the platform came the shouting of the hunters in the swimming pool. On the end of the platform, Piggy was lying flat, looking down into the brilliant water.

“People don’t help much.”

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

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“Simon. He helps.” He pointed at the shelters.

“All the rest rushed off. He’s done as much as I have. Only—”

“Simon’s always about.”

Ralph stared back to the shelters with Jack by his side.

“Do a bit for you,” muttered Jack, “before I have a bathe.”

“Don’t bother.”

But when they reached the shelters Simon was not to be seen. Ralph put his head in the hole, withdrew it, and turned to Jack.

“He’s buzzed off.”

“Got fed up,” said Jack, “and gone for a bathe.”

Ralph frowned.

“He’s queer. He’s funny.”

Jack nodded, as much for the sake of agreeing as anything, and by tacit consent they left the shelter and went toward the bathing pool.

“And then,” said Jack, “when I’ve had a bathe and something to eat, I’ll just trek over to the other side of the mountain and see if I can see any traces. Coming?”

“But the sun’s nearly set!”

“I might have time—”

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

“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 water of the bathing pool and the shouting and splashing and laughing were only just sufficient to bring them together again.

Simon 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 he had followed them for a few yards and then stopped. He had stood frowning down at a pile of sand on the beach where somebody had been trying to build a little house or hut. Then he turned his back on this and walked into the forest with an air of purpose. He was a small, skinny boy, his chin pointed, and his eyes so bright they had deceived Ralph into thinking him delightfully gay and wicked. The coarse mop of black hair was long and swung down, almost concealing a low, broad forehead. He wore the remains of shorts and his feet were bare like Jack's. Always darkish in color, Simon was burned by the sun to a deep tan that glistened with sweat.

He picked his way up the scar, passed the great rock where Ralph had climbed on the first morning, then turned off to his right among the trees. He walked with an accustomed tread through the acres of fruit trees, where the least energetic could find an easy if unsatisfying meal. Flower and fruit grew together on the same tree and everywhere was the scent of ripeness and the booming of a million bees at pasture. Here the litluns who had run after him caught up with him. They talked, cried out

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unintelligibly, lugged him toward the trees. Then, amid the roar of bees in the afternoon sunlight, Simon found for them the fruit they could not reach, pulled off the choicest from up in the foliage, passed them back down to the endless, outstretched hands. When he had satisfied them he paused and looked round. The littluns watched him inscrutably over double handfuls of ripe fruit.

Simon turned away from them and went where the just perceptible path led him. Soon high jungle closed in. Tall trunks bore unexpected pale flowers all the way up to the dark canopy where life went on clamorously. The air here was dark too, and the creepers dropped their ropes like the rigging of foundered ships. His feet left prints in the soft soil and the creepers shivered throughout their lengths when he bumped them.

He came at last to a place where more sunshine fell. Since they had not so far to go for light the creepers had woven a great mat that hung at the side of an open space in the jungle; for here a patch of rock came close to the surface and would not allow more than little plants and ferns to grow. The whole space was walled with dark aromatic bushes, and was a bowl of heat and light. A great tree, fallen across one corner, leaned against the trees that still stood and a rapid climber flaunted red and yellow sprays right to the top.

Simon paused. He looked over his shoulder as Jack had done at the close ways behind him and glanced swiftly round to confirm that he was utterly alone. For a moment his movements were almost furtive. Then he

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bent down and wormed his way into the center of the mat. The creepers and the bushes were so close that he left his sweat on them and they pulled together behind him. When he was secure in the middle he was in a little cabin screened off from the open space by a few leaves. He squatted down, parted the leaves and looked out into the clearing. Nothing moved but a pair of gaudy butterflies that danced round each other in the hot air. Holding his breath he cocked a critical ear at the sounds of the island. Evening was advancing toward the island; the sounds of the bright fantastic birds, the bee-sounds, even the crying of the gulls that were returning to their roosts among the square rocks, were fainter. The deep sea breaking miles away on the reef made an undertone less perceptible than the susurrations of the blood.

Simon dropped the screen of leaves back into place. The slope of the bars of honey-colored sunlight decreased; they slid up the bushes, passed over the green candle-like buds, moved up toward the canopy, and darkness thickened under the trees. With the fading of the light the riotous colors died and the heat and urgency cooled away. The candle-buds stirred. Their green sepals drew back a little and the white tips of the flowers rose delicately to meet the open air.

Now the sunlight had lifted clear of the open space and withdrawn from the sky. Darkness poured out, submerging the ways between the trees till they were dim and strange as the bottom of the sea. The candle-buds opened their wide white flowers glimmering under the light that

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pricked down from the first stars. Their scent spilled out into the air and took possession of the island.

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