



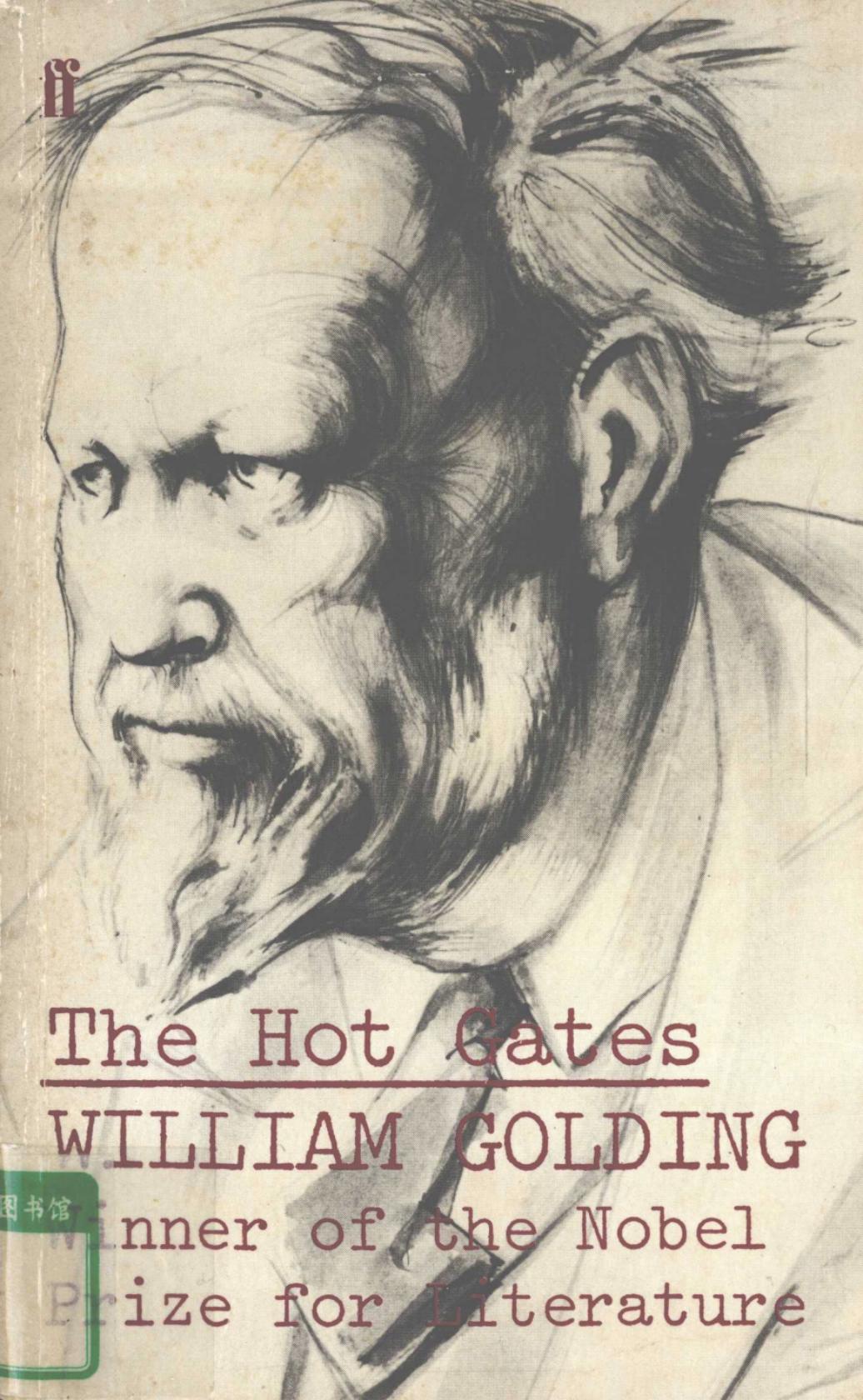
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# The Hot Gates

WILLIAM GOLDING

Winner of the Nobel  
Prize for Literature

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图书馆

A dazzling collection of occasional writings by the Nobel Prize-winning novelist on subjects ranging from Thermopylae to the English Channel, and from Coral Island to Jules Verne.

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Tony Tanner in New Society

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*and other occasional pieces*

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# THE HOT GATES

*and other occasional pieces*



WILLIAM GOLDING



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## Preface

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The following pieces are collected from those I have written during the last ten years. They are all occasional in the strict sense of the word; so that now they are to acquire some sort of permanence I have edited them slightly, removing what seems no longer applicable, and here and there removing a remark I thought plain crass.

When I brought them together I found some contaminating awareness in my mind had so adjusted them to the requirements of their varying audiences that they fell into groups which might have been the work of different writers. I cannot conceal this faint dishonesty unless I rewrite the lot, and must let it go. Where my transatlantic editors altered my spelling to conform with American custom I have let it remain so. Our system and theirs are illogical though reasonable. Why choose between them?

I ought to say a little about the piece called *Fable*. In 1962 I was asked to give some lectures at UCLA in California. The second of these dealt with aspects of my novel *Lord of the Flies*, since it had become a campus requirement. I elaborated this lecture and took it round a variety of American universities where it answered some of the standard questions which students were asking me. I print it here, in the hope that it may continue to do so.

I have to acknowledge with thanks permission to reprint articles from *The Spectator*, *Holiday Magazine*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Listener*.



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## **PEOPLE AND PLACES**



## The Hot Gates

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I had lunch in Lamia, a provincial town of Thessaly which lies on the route south to Athens. Most people go through Lamia without stopping, but I was following the route of the Persian invasion, that spectacular combined operation of almost twenty-five hundred years ago.

I had come down past Olympus and through the Vale of Tempe, with a classical atlas in my hand that made no mention of Lamia; so when I came unexpectedly on the town at midday, I rejoiced and thought of food. As Greek food goes, I was lucky. The time was early April, and outside every house people were grouped round an open fire. They had the Easter lamb spitted and were turning the repulsive, naked thing over the coals, hour after hour. So I ordered Easter lamb in the certainty of knowing what I would get; and it was so.

I drank *ouzo* as an *apéritif*, dribbling it into a tumbler of water. It tasted like licorice and looked like milk. They say you can't drink Greek water without getting typhus, but I did. There's no other way of drinking *ouzo*, and if you don't drink *ouzo* as an *apéritif* in a Greek provincial town, you go without.

Lamia central square was hot and dusty. The tables of the one restaurant spilled out on the pavement in the shade of some small trees. I managed to stop the waiter bringing me the wine of the country. This is *retsina*, which should be drunk once and avoided thereafter. It stinks of resin and tastes like paint remover. You must insist on an island wine, Rodos, say, or Demestica, which I got that day and liked.

It was in these parts, in 480 B.C., that the Persian army had been held up for a few days on its way to Athens. South of Lamia, the river Spercheios has cut a valley athwart the invasion route, and the road must crawl round the corner on the other side of the valley between the cliffs and the sea. Sitting beneath a

## PEOPLE AND PLACES

tree, and drinking my Demestica, I thought about Athens and Persia, and the hot springs that bubble out of the cliff where the road is narrowest, so that the Greeks call it the Hot Gates. I thought of myself too — dreaming for twenty years of coming here, poring over ancient maps; and now faced with the duty and the necessity of trying to understand.

I had seen the valley of the Spercheios when I entered Lamia, had glimpsed the vast wall of rock five thousand feet high on the other side of the valley, which lay between me and Athens. Athens was shining Athens, the Athens of history, shining in the mind. Yet when the Persian Xerxes, King of Kings, drove his army at her, she did not shine. At that time she was little but a thorn in his side, a small city which had insisted on running her own affairs — and had an odd knack of encouraging cities which ought to bow to the King of Kings to do the same.

Athens needed thirty years, and then she would shine as no city had shone before or has shone since. For all her faults she would take humanity with her a long, long step — but on that day she was nothing but a pain in the neck of the King of Kings, who had the greatest army in the world poised at her last gate.

I had *café turque* in a minute cup — one third black liquid and two thirds sludge, a delightful combination — and Greek 'Cognac'. If you have begun with *ouzo*, do not finish with Greek 'Cognac'. Even when separated by Demestica, they strike on each other like a match on the matchbox and produce a flame that does not readily die out.

I had my 'Cognac', and being English (mad dogs and Englishmen), marched out into the midday sun while the rest of Greece went sensibly to sleep. I sat down under an olive tree on the north side of the valley, where Xerxes may have stood to consider the small remaining problem before him. Mine was different. I had to re-create his problem. The Spercheios has brought so much mud down the valley that fields have pushed miles out into the sea. Where there was once a narrow pass, there is now room for road and rail, and fields that lap round the corner.

I went back for my car and drove down into the little valley and across the plain. A new motor road lies across it and sweeps round the corner where the old Hot Gates had lain between the

## THE HOT GATES

cliffs and the sea. The road was unsurfaced, and in the rearview mirror I saw the great white cloud of dust that hung in the air behind me until it settled on the crops.

The Hot Gates were deserted. I came to an avenue and then to a group of mean-looking buildings huddled among trees. I drove in, but of course there was no one about. It was a spa, I supposed, and as far as I was concerned, on that burning afternoon, anyone who wanted a hot bath — with native sulphur — was welcome to it. I sat in the car and considered that history has left not a trace of scar on this landscape.

At the time of the Persian invasion, when the sea came close to these cliffs, the narrow track had held seven thousand men — Spartans, Thebans, Locrians, Thespians, Phocians — who watched one another as much as they watched the enemy. Greece to the south was in a turmoil as the Persians marched toward it. What to do? Whom to trust? What to believe? The track that summer was thick with dusty messengers bearing appeals for help, or accusations, or denials, or prayers to the gods. In any event, with Xerxes only a few miles away, there was a mixed force to hold the track — groups sent by the cities of Greece, and small groups at that. No city dared strip itself of troops.

Was there no memorial left? I drove out of the avenue and found one man awake at last. He was a goatherd carrying a thumbstick and a whistle. His goats were a tumultuous jumble of horns, of black and brown fur with ruffs and edgings of white, and staring, yellow, libidinous eyes. You see these herds in Greece as you may see flocks of sheep on a country road in England. Each goat has its bell, and the tinny concert, half-heard from the side of a mountain, is one of the evocative sounds of Greece. I asked him about the Hot Gates, and he pointed forward along the road. Then he turned aside with his goats and they began to file off and scatter up the side of the cliffs.

I drove on to the Hot Gates proper, where once there had been room for no more than one wagon at a time. Sure enough, there was a memorial, level with the place where that mixed force had once stood in the pass, a nineteenth-century monument, grandiose and expensive. When the battle was fought, the place where the monument stands was out in the sea.

Nature has not done her best here for the story of that battle.

## PEOPLE AND PLACES

The Vale of Tempe would have been a better place, and there are a hundred haunted spots in Greece where the setting would be more striking and the drama more obvious. Quiet, crop-fledged fields lie between the cliffs and the sea, with the scar of the motor road on them. The slopes and cliffs, though sprinkled with shrubs and flowers, aromatic in the hot sun, are arid with outcroppings of rock. There is dust everywhere. Little gullies leading back into the cliffs are marked with low stone walls that look ancient but are recent structures made by farmers and goatherds. If you go to the Hot Gates, take some historical knowledge and your imagination with you.

Just at the mouth of one of these gullies, I came across a mound. It was not very imposing to look at. The Greeks have planted it with laurels; but laurels planted recently in Greece never seem to be doing very well. There are some by the Springs of Daphne, some on the field of Marathon, some at Delphi — and they all look sheepish and a bit scruffy. But it was here, by this very mound, that the mixed force led by Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans came to hold the pass.

Standing by the dusty mound on that April afternoon, in the deserted landscape, where the only sound was an occasional clatter from the laurel leaves in a hot gust of wind, I wondered what Leonidas made of it all. He was, like all the Spartans, dedicated soldier. But what did he think? As he looked north where Lamia now lies on the hills across the valley, he must have heard the sound of quarrelling at his back. That is the one certain thing — the mixed force was quarrelling. (151)

You can imagine the sullen afternoon lengthening, the ribaldry, the sudden shouts, perhaps even the clash of arms, the mutter of men who had to do as they were told but knew better than their leaders, the cynical laughter of men who had no faith in anything because Greece behind the wall — Athens, Sparta, Thebes and the rest — was at war not only with Persia but with itself. Then there had come a flash and glitter from the flank of the mountain across the valley.

Mark that Leonidas did not know how Athens needed thirty years to blossom. For him, Sparta, that dull, cruel city, shone brighter than Athens. But as the Persian army seeped down from a dozen pathways into the valley, and the mixed force fell silent at his back, it must have been some inarticulate and bitter