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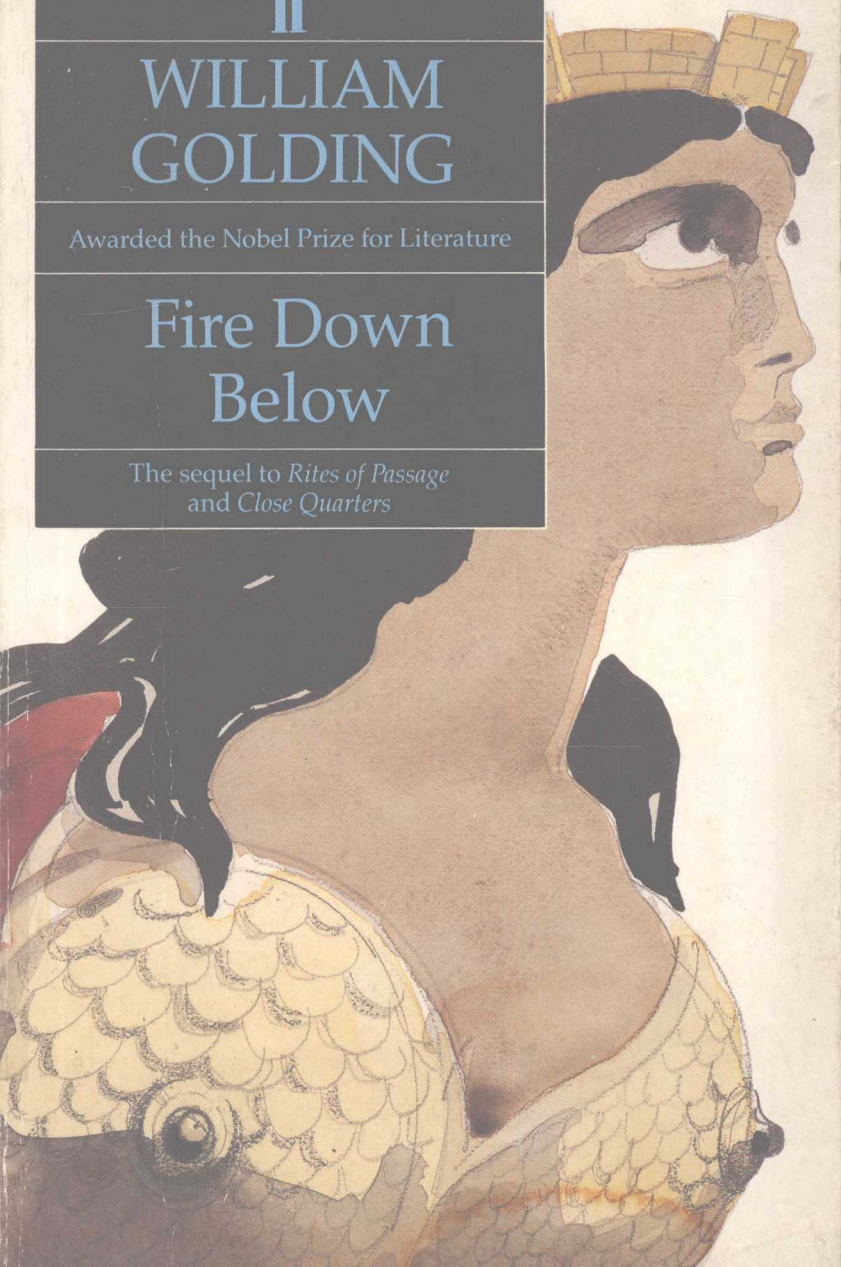
WILLIAM GOLDING

Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature

Fire Down Below

The sequel to *Rites of Passage* and *Close Quarters*



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FIRE DOWN BELOW

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Fire Down Below

by William Golding

Fiction

LORD OF THE FLIES
THE INHERITORS
PINCHER MARTIN
FREE FALL
THE SPIRE
THE PYRAMID
THE SCORPION GOD
DARKNESS VISIBLE
THE PAPER MEN
RITES OF PASSAGE
CLOSE QUARTERS
FIRE DOWN BELOW

Essays

THE HOT GATES
A MOVING TARGET

Travel

AN EGYPTIAN JOURNAL

Play

THE BRASS BUTTERFLY

Fire Down Below

3

FIRE DOWN BELOW

(1)

Captain Anderson turned away from me, cupped his hands round his mouth and roared.

"Masthead!"

The man who was straddled there next to the motionless figure of young Willis held up a hand as a sign that he had heard. Anderson lowered his hands from his mouth and "sang out" in what for him was more nearly a normal tone of voice.

"Is the boy dead?"

This time the man must have shouted back but his voice was not like the captain's and what with the wind and sea, let alone the ship's unsteady motion, I could not hear it. Thirty or more feet below him in the fighting top Lieutenant Benét—in a voice loud as the captain's but a tenor to his bass—repeated what the man had said.

"Can't rightly tell but he feels main cold."

"Get him down then!"

Willis was the slack-twisted midshipman whose incompetence had contributed to the loss of our topmasts. He had been condemned to spend alternate watches astride the topmast yard set on the flimsy pole which had been rigged as a substitute. Now there was a long pause and what looked like a wrestling match going on at the masthead while yet another seaman ascended, taking a tackle up with him. Willis lurched, so that I gasped as he swung free. But he was made fast in a kind of seat. He was lowered down, turning and twisting on the end of the rope, now swinging out as we rolled and

now coming in to thump the mast itself. Lieutenant Benét shouted.

"Bowse the man in there, you idle bugger!"

Willis was held and passed from one guiding hand to another. The duty watch or part of the watch who had stationed themselves in the rigging of the mainmast handled him as carefully as a woman with a baby. Lieutenant Benét slid all sixty feet down a rope from the fighting top and landed lightly on the deck.

"Handsomely does it!"

He knelt by the boy. Captain Anderson spoke from the forrard rail of the quarterdeck.

"Is he dead, Mr Benét?"

Benét swept off his hat with an elegant gesture, revealing what I had come to regard as far too much yellow hair as he did so.

"Not quite, sir. All right, lads. Get him down to the gunroom and roundly now!"

The little group disappeared down the ladders—or stairs, as I was more and more determined to call them—with Lieutenant Benét after them as confidently as if he were expert in medicine as in all else.

I turned to Mr Smiles, the sailing master, who had the watch.

"He looked dead to me."

There was a fierce hiss from the captain. Once again I had violated his precious "standing orders" by speaking to the officer of the watch. But this time as if he was conscious that he was to blame in prolonging the boy's punishment to the point of danger he turned with a grimace, which on the stage would have had a snarl in it, and went to his private quarters.

5

FIRE DOWN BELOW

Mr Smiles had looked all round the horizon. Now he examined the set of our few sails.

"It is a time for dying."

I was at once irritated and appalled. I believe myself to be wholly devoid of superstition but the words were—uncomfortable when spoken in a crippled and quite possibly sinking ship. I had been cheered by an improvement in the weather. For though we were now standing inexorably southward towards the polar seas, the weather seemed no worse than it might have been in the English Channel. I was about to differ with the man but my friend the first lieutenant, Charles Summers, appeared from the passenger lobby and climbed to the quarterdeck.

"Edmund! I hear you rescued young Willis!"

"I, Charles? Never believe such a story! I am a passenger and would not for the world interfere with the running of the ship. I merely told Lieutenant Benét that I thought the young fellow looked deucedly comatose. Benét did the rest—as usual."

Charles looked round him. Then he drew me to the rail away from Smiles.

"You chose the one officer who could venture a difference of opinion with the captain and not be rebuked for it."

"That was diplomacy."

"You do not like Benét, do you? I too have differences with him. The foremast—"

"I admire Benét. But he is too perfect."

"His intentions are good."

"He is nimble in the rigging as a midshipman! But, Charles—do you realize that after all these months at

sea I have never climbed a mast? Today, although the motion is unsteady it is slight compared with what it has been!"

"Is it? I am so habituated to the motion of a ship—"

"Oh, I am sure you could walk up the side of a house and not lose your balance. But the wind will get up, will it not? Now is perhaps my only chance of finding out what it is like to be a common sailor."

"I will take you as far as the fighting top."

"This will be a most valuable experience. Suppose me—as may befall—to be a Member of Parliament. 'Mr Speaker. To those of us who have actually climbed into the fighting top of a man of war at sea—'"

"The Honourable Member for Timbuctoo should pipe down, lay hold of the ropes and swing himself round. Gently! You're not a midshipman playing tag through the rigging!"

"Oh my God, this is no place for seaboots!"

"Feel the rung with your boot before you put your weight on it. Don't look down. If you were to slip I should catch you."

" 'Safe in the arms of the Lord.' "

"Your casual blasphemy—"

"I beg your pardon, Bishop. The exclamation was forced from me. It was my seaboot swore, not I, as Euripides might have said but did not. It missed a rung."

"Now then. No nonsense about climbing out round. Up through the lubber's hole."

"If I must indeed choose the easier path—you insist?"

7

FIRE DOWN BELOW

"Up with you!"

"Oh, God. It is commodious. Half a dozen good fellows might live up here provided they only used the vast hole I climbed through for purposes of necessity. 'For sale a villa. Luxuriously fitted, wooden construction, sea view—and a nautical gentleman with his eye sweeping the horizon!' "

"Fawcett. Now that Mr Willis has—vacated the masthead you may resume your lookout at that position."

The lanky seaman knuckled his forehead, shifted his quid from one side of his mouth to the other and clambered out of sight.

"Well. How do you find it?"

"Now I dare to look down, I see that our ship, though she is a seventy-four, has shrunk. Really, Charles! Monstrous timbers such as this mast should not be stuck in such a rowboat! It is impossible that we should not be overset! I will not look—my eyes are shut."

"Inspect the horizon and you will feel more the thing."

"My hair is so erected it is pushing off my beaver."

"It is no more than sixty feet down to the deck."

" 'No more!' But our yellow-haired friend slid all that way down on a rope."

"Benét is an active young man, full of spirit and ideas. But how would you go on if you was masthead?"

"Like poor Willis? Die, I think. Smiles said it is a time for dying."

I sat up cautiously and held on with both hands to

the comforting ropes which stayed the fighting top. The sensation was agreeable.

"That is better, Charles."

"You were worried by what Smiles said?"

"Did he mean the Pikes' little girls?"

"They are somewhat better in fact."

"Davies, that poor, senile midshipman? Mrs East? She must be better, for I have seen her with Mrs Pike. Does he mean Miss Brocklebank, I wonder?"

"Mr Brocklebank says she is very poorly. A decline."

A thought occurred to me which set me laughing.

"Does he mean Mr Prettiman, our testy political theorist? Miss Granham told me that her fiancé had suffered a severe fall."

"You find him comic?"

"Well. He cannot be entirely despicable or an estimable lady such as Miss Granham would not have consented to make him the happiest of men. But comic! He is wicked! Why—he is ill-disposed to the government of his own country, to the Crown, to our system of representation—in fact to everything which makes us the foremost country in the world."

"He is in a bad way none the less."

"No great loss if he leaves us. I am only sorry for Miss Granham, for though she has bitten my head off on several occasions, I repeat, she is an estimable lady and seems genuinely attached to the man. Women are very strange."

Someone else was climbing the rigging. It was Mr Tommy Taylor, who appeared with a monkeylike dexterity, swinging himself over the outer edge of the fight-

ing top instead of coming the easier and safer way up through the hole in the middle.

"Mr Benét's compliments, sir, and Mr Willis seems comfortable. He is asleep and snoring."

"Very good, Mr Taylor. You are on watch?"

"Yes, sir. Mr Smiles, sir. His doggy, sir."

"You may return to the quarterdeck."

"Excuse me, sir. Watch changing now, sir."

Indeed the ship's bell was ringing out the time.

"Very well, you are off watch. Come and be a schoolmaster. Mr Talbot here is by way of thinking he would like to learn everything there is to know about a ship."

"No no, Charles! *Pax*!"

"For example, Mr Taylor, Mr Talbot would be interested to know what kind of a mast this is."

"It's a mainmast, sir."

"Are you trying to be witty, Mr Taylor? What is its construction?"

"It's a 'made' mast, sir. That means a mast which is all separate bits. Not 'bitts' of course. Bits."

Mr Taylor laughed so loudly I concluded he intended a witticism. Indeed, the boy was always in such high spirits I believe he found our desperate situation in a crippled and possibly sinking ship a joyous experience.

"Name those bits for Mr Talbot, Mr Taylor."

"Well, sir, the round bits on either side are the bolsters. Then there's the trestle trees which hold us up. Under them there's the round cheeks to keep the trestle from sliding down the mast. Mr Gibbs, the carpenter, he said—"

The boy broke into a loud laugh at the memory.

10

FIRE DOWN BELOW

"He said, 'Every made mast has two lovely cheeks young fellow, which is two less than what you've got innit?'"

"After that sally, young man, you may take yoursel off. You have a dirty mind."

"Aye aye, sir. Thank you, sir."

The boy departed with an offhand agility very suit able to his age and sex. The sight of him *diminishin* down the same rope which Mr Benét had used mad me giddy. I looked up, fixing my eyes for security or the foremast which stood up between us and the bows

"Charles! It is moving! There—see! No, it is stil again. The top, I mean—there it goes, it is making small circle, an uneven circle—"

"You knew that surely? We had thought it wa sprung—a kind of greenstick fracture, but in fact th foot of the mast has broken the shoe and we have hac to take measures. Come, Edmund! There is nothing t be done."

"It should not move like that!"

"Of course not. It is why we have spread no sail or the foremast or the mizzenmast since they are supposec to balance each other. Do you see the wedges where th foremast passes through the deck? No, you cannot— but they keep being forced out by the movement. W have made the mast as secure and motionless as we can.'

"It makes me sick."

"Do not look then. I should have remembered hov obvious the lurching is from up here. Oh no! Look! no at the mast but past it at the horizon! The wind, th south wind, the one we did not want!"

"What will it do?"

II

FIRE DOWN BELOW

"Cold weather. We shall be able to haul round to the east, which of course is where we want to go, but we also want to get far south where the constant strong winds are. We must go down. Come. I will go first."

We climbed down to the deck and I stood in the lee of the starboard mainstays to watch as our old hulk lumbered round on the starboard tack when the south wind reached us. It had none of the softness which we associate with "south" in happier climes. Charles stayed on deck to watch Mr Cumbershum and Captain Anderson achieve the change of course. He was about to walk off forrard when I buttonholed him again.

"Can you spend another moment or two with me? I know how busy you are and do not want to interfere in your scanty time of leisure—"

"A first lieutenant is more at leisure in the middle of a voyage than at either end! But I must be seen about the ship and detect such awful crimes as a hammock left slung or a rope uncheesed—*that* is a properly cheesed rope, for your information. Well. Let us walk up and down in the waist as we used to."

"With all my heart."

Charles and I proceeded then to pace briskly back and forth in the waist. We stepped over the taut cables of his frapping, strode past the mainmast with its white line, its complication of wedges, ropes, blocks and bitts, on towards the break of the fo'castle before which the stripped foremast described its almost invisible circle in the sky. The first time we reached it I paused and looked. The complication was as great here as at the mainmast. The foremast was no less than three feet in diameter and where it passed through the deck it was surrounded

by a collar made of great wedges. As I watched I saw them move, slightly and unevenly. A seaman stood by the mast and leaned on a huge maul. He saw the first lieutenant watching and shouldered the thing, waited for a few moments, then let it fall on a wedge which was standing a little *prouder* than its fellows.

Charles nodded. I felt his hand on my arm as he drew me away and we resumed our walk.

"Is he doing any good?"

"Possibly not. But the appearance of doing good is better than nothing. At least it comforts the passengers."

"That is *à propos*. Charles, I am deeply sensible of the courtesy you officers have extended to me in allowing me the use of one of your hutches—cabins, I would say! But all good things have an end and I must return to the passenger quarters, in short, to my hutch off the passenger lobby."

"Did you not know? Miss Brocklebank has appropriated it! I have said nothing, since the poor lady is so sick. Surely you have not the heart to displace her?"

"She has squatters' rights. I mean my other hutch."

"Where Colley willed himself to death and where Wheeler committed suicide? You must not sleep there! Is our company in the wardroom—my company—become tedious to you?"

"You know it is not!"

"Well then, my dear fellow! A roughcut piece of nautical timber like I—such as me—might reasonably sleep there! But you—the place is dirtied."

"I do not relish the idea, it is true."

"Why then?"

"It is a case where I think I may say I have considered