THE SPIRE

a novel by

William Golding

author of

LORD OF THE FLIES

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The Spire

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By the same author

LORD OF THE FLIES

THE INHERITORS

PINCHER MARTIN

FREE FALL

THE SCORPION GOD

THE BRASS BUTTERFLY

The Spire

One

He was laughing, chin up, and shaking his head. God the Father was exploding in his face with a glory of sunlight through painted glass, a glory that moved with his movements to consume and exalt Abraham and Isaac and then God again. The tears of laughter in his eyes made additional spokes and wheels and rainbows.

Chin up, hands holding the model spire before him, eyes half closed; joy—

"I've waited half my life for this day!"

Opposite him, the other side of the model of the cathedral on its trestle table, stood the chancellor, his face dark with shadow, over ancient pallor.

"I don't know, my Lord Dean. I don't know."

He peered across at the model of the spire, where Jocelin held it so firmly in both hands. His voice was bathin, and wandered vaguely into the large, high air of the chapter house.

"But if you consider that this small piece of wood—how long is it?"

"Eighteen inches, my Lord Chancellor."

"Eighteen inches. Yes. Well. It represents, does it not, a construction of wood and stone and metal—"

"Four hundred feet high."

The chancellor moved out into sunlight, hands up to his chest, and peered round him. He looked up at the roof. Jocelin looked sideways at him, loving him.

"The foundations. I know. But God will provide."

The chancellor had found what he was looking for, a memory.

"Ah yes."

Then, in ancient busyness, he crept away over the pavement to the door and through it. He left a message, in the air behind him.

"Mattins. Of course."

Jocelin stood still, and shot an arrow of love after him. My place, my house, my people. He will come out of the vestry at the tail of the procession and turn left as he has always done; then he will remember and turn right to the Lady Chapel! So Jocelin laughed again, chin lifted, in holy mirth. I know them all, know what they are doing and will do, know what they have done. All these years I have gone on, put the place on me like a coat.

He stopped laughing and wiped his eyes. He took the white spire and jammed it firmly in the square hole cut in the old model of the cathedral.

"There!"

The model was like a man lying on his back. The nave was his legs placed together, the transepts on either side were his arms outspread. The choir was his body; and the Lady Chapel, where now the services would be held, was his head. And now also, springing, projecting, bursting, erupting from the heart of the building, there was its crown and majesty, the new spire. They don't know, he thought, they can't know until I tell them of my vision! And laughing again for joy, he went out of the chapter

house to where the sun piled into the open square of the cloisters. And I must remember that the spire isn't everything! I must do, as far as possible, exactly what I have always done.

So he went round the cloisters, lifting curtain after curtain, until he came to the side door into the west end of the cathedral. He lifted the latch carefully so as not to make a noise. He bowed his head as he passed through, and said as he always did interiorly, "Lift up your heads, O ye Gates!" But even as he stepped inside, he knew that his caution was unnecessary, since there was a whole confusion of noise in the cathedral already. Mattins, diminished, its sounds so small they might be held in one hand, was nonetheless audible from the Lady Chapel at the other end of the cathedral, beyond the wood and canvas screen. There was a nearer sound that told—though the components were so mixed by echo as to be part of each other—that men were digging in earth and stone. They were talking, ordering, shouting sometimes, dragging wood across pavement, wheeling and dropping loads, then throwing them roughly into place, so that the total noise would have been formless as the noises of the market place had not the echoing spaces made it chase round and round so that it caught up with itself and the shrill choir, and sang endlessly on one note. The noises were so new that he hurried to the centre line of the cathedral in the shadow of the great west door, genuflected to the hidden High Altar; and then stood, looking.

He blinked for a moment. There had been sun before, but not like this. The most seeming solid thing in the nave was not the barricade of wood and canvas that cut the cathedral in two, at the choir steps, was not the two arcades of the nave, nor the chantries and painted tomb

slabs between them. The most solid thing was the light. It smashed through the rows of windows in the south aisle, so that they exploded with colour; it slanted before him from right to left in an exact formation, to hit the bottom yard of the pillars on the north side of the nave. Everywhere, fine dust gave these rods and trunks of light the importance of a dimension. He blinked at them again, seeing, near at hand, how the individual grains of dust turned over each other, or bounced all together, like mayfly in a breath of wind. He saw how further away they drifted cloudily, coiled, or hung in a moment of pause, becoming, in the most distant rods and trunks, nothing but colour, honey-colour slashed across the body of the cathedral. Where the south transept lighted the crossways from a hundred and fifty foot of grisaille, the honey thickened in a pillar that lifted straight as Abel's from the men working with crows at the pavement.

He shook his head in rueful wonder at the solid sunlight. If it were not for that Abel's pillar, he thought, I would take the important level of light to be a true dimension, and so believe that my stone ship lay aground on her side; and he smiled a little, to think how the mind touches all things with law, yet deceives itself as easily as a child. Facing that barricade of wood and canvas at the other end of the nave—and now that the candles have gone from the side altars, I could think this was some sort of pagan temple; and those two men posed so centrally in the sun dust with their crows (and what a quarry noise and echo as they lever up the slab and let it fall back) the priests of some outlandish rite— Forgive me.

In this house for a hundred and fifty years, we have woven a rich fabric of constant praise. Things shall be as they were; only better, richer, the pattern of worship complete at last. I must go to pray.

And then he was aware that he would not go to pray yet, even on this great day of joy. And he laughed aloud for pure joy, knowing why he would not go, knowing as of old, the daily pattern; knowing who was hunting, who preaching, who deputising for whom, knowing the security of the stone ship, the security of her crew.

As if the knowing was cue for entry in an interlude, he heard a latch lift in the northwest corner and a door creak open. I shall see, as I see daily, my daughter in God!

Sure enough, as if his memory of her had called her in, she came quickly through the door, so that he stood, waiting with his blessing for her as always. But Pangall's wife turned to her left, lifted a hand against the dust. He had only time to glimpse the long, sweet face before she had gone up the north aisle instead of coming straight across; so that he had to think his blessing after her. He watched her with love and a little disappointment as she passed the unlighted altars of the north aisle, saw her pull back her hood so that the white wimple showed, got a glimpse of green dress as the grey cloak swung back. She is entirely woman, he thought, loving her; and this foolish, this childish curiosity shows it. But that is a matter for Pangall or Father Anselm. And as if she recognised her own folly he saw how she circled the pit quickly, one hand up against the dust, crossed the nave and clashed the door of the kingdom behind her. He nodded soberly.

"I suppose, after all, it must make some difference to us."

After the clash of the door there was near-silence; then in the silence, a new little noise, tap, tap, tap. He turned to his left, and there the dumb man sat on the plinth of the north arcade in his leather apron, the lump of stone between his knees.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"I think he made you choose me, Gilbert, because I stand still so much!"

The dumb man got quickly to his feet. Jocelin smiled at him.

"Of all the people connected with this thing, I must seem to do least, don't you think?"

The dumb man smiled doglike, and hummed with his empty mouth. Jocelin laughed back, delightedly, and nodded as if they shared a secret.

"Ask those four pillars at the crossways if they do nothing!"

The dumb man laughed and nodded back.

"Soon I shall go to pray. You may follow me there, sit quietly, and work. Bring a cloth with you for the chips and dust, or Pangall will sweep you out of the Lady Chapel like a leaf. We mustn't fret Pangall."

Then there was another new noise. He forgot the dumb man and listened, with his head turned to one side. No, he said to himself, they can't have done it yet; it can't be true! So he hurried away into the south aisle where he could peer slantwise across the cathedral into the north transept. He stood by the corner of the Peverel chantry. He whispered with joy too deep for the open air.

"It's true. After all these years of work and striving. Glory be."

For they were doing the unthinkable. I have walked by there for years, he thought. There was outside and inside, as clearly divided, as eternally and inevitably divided, as yesterday and today. The smooth stone of the inside, patterned and traced with paint, the rough and lichened stuff of the outside; yesterday, or a Hail Mary ago, they were a quarter of a mile apart. Yet now the air blows through them. They touch, those separated sides.

I can see, as through a spy hole, right across the close to the corner of the chancellor's house, where perhaps Ivo is.

Courage. Glory be. It is a final beginning. It was one thing to let him dig a pit there at the crossways like a grave for some notable. This is different. Now I lay a hand on the very body of my church. Like a surgeon, I take my knife to the stomach drugged with poppy.

And his mind played for a while with the fancy of the drug, thinking that the thin sound of mattins was the slow breathing of the drugged body where it lay stretched on its back.

There were young voices on the other side of the chantry.

"Say what you like; he's proud."

"And ignorant."

"Do you know what? He thinks he is a saint! A man like that!"

But when the two deacons saw the dean looming over them, they fell to their knees.

He looked down, loving them in his joy.

"Now, now, my children! What's this? Backbiting? Scandal? Denigration?"

They bent their heads and said nothing.

"Who is this poor fellow? You should pray for him, rather. But there."

So he seized two handfuls of curls and tugged them gently, turning up first one white face and then the other.

"Ask the chancellor for a penance concerning this matter. Understand the penance rightly, dear children, and it will be a great joy to you."

He turned away from them, to walk up the south aisle; but there was still another delay. Pangall stood at the temporary door that led through the wood and canvas screen from the south ambulatory into the crossways;

and now, seeing Jocelin, he dismissed his attendant sweepers and limped forward, left foot dragging a little, broom held crossways in his hands.

"Reverend Father."

"Not now, Pangall."

"Please!"

Jocelin shook his head, and made to pass round; but the man held out a roughened hand as if he would dare to lay it on the dean's cassock. Jocelin stopped, looked down and spoke quickly.

"What d'you want, then? The same thing as before?"

"They—"

"They are not your business. Understand that once and for all."

But still Pangall stood his ground, looking up under his thatch of dark hair. There was dust on his brown tunic, his cross-gartered legs, his old shoes. There was dust on his angry face. His voice was hoarse, with dust and anger.

"The day before yesterday they killed a man."

"I know. Listen, my son—"

Pangall shook his head with such solemnity and certainty that Jocelin fell silent, looking down, mouth open. Pangall grounded the handle of his broom, and stood with his weight on it. He looked round the pavement, then up at the dean's face.

"One day, they will kill me."

For a while they were both silent, among the singing that the echo made of the work noises. The dust danced in the sun between them. All at once Jocelin remembered his joy. He dropped both his hands on the man's leather shoulders and gripped tight.

"They shan't kill you. No one shall kill you."

"Then they will drive me out."

"No harm shall come to you. I say so."

Pangall gripped the broom fiercely. He put his weight on both feet. His mouth twisted.

"Reverend Father, why did you do it?"

Resignedly Jocelin let his hands fall and clasped them before his waist.

"You know as well as I do, my son. So that this house will be even more glorious than before."

Pangall showed his teeth.

"By breaking the place down?"

"Now stop, before you say too much."

When Pangall answered, it was like an attack.

"Have you ever spent the night here, Reverend Father?"

Gently, as to a little one.

"Many nights. You know that as well as I do, my son."

"When snow falls and all that weight lies on the lead roof; when leaves choke the gutter—"

"Pangall!"

"My great-great-grandfather helped to build it. In the hot weather he would roam through the roof over the vault up there, as I do. Why?"

"Softly, Pangall, softly!"

"Why? Why?"

"Tell me then."

"He found one of the oak logs smouldering. By the luck of his wit he carried an adze with him. If he went for water the roof would have been ablaze and the lead like a river before he could get back. He adzed out the embers. He made a hole you could hide a, a child in; and he carried the embers out in arms that were roasted like pork. Did you know that?"

"No."

"But I know it. We know it. All this—" and he made a jab with his broom at the dust-laden moulding—"this breaking and digging up—let me take you into the roof."

"I've other things to do and so have you."

"I must speak with you—"

"And what d'you suppose you're doing now?"

Pangall took a step back. He looked round at the pillars and the high, glittering windows as if they could tell him what to say.

"Reverend Father. In the roof. Just by the door from the stair in the southwest turret there is an adze, sharpened, tallowed, guarded, ready."

"That's well done. Wise."

Pangall made a gesture with his free hand.

"It's nothing. It's what we are for. We've swept, cleaned, plastered, cut stone and sometimes glass, we've said nothing—"

"You've all been faithful servants of the House. I try to be one myself."

"My father, and my father's father. And the more so since I'm the last."

"She's a good woman and wife, my son. Hope and be patient."

"They've made a game of my whole life. And more. It's not just this— Come and see my cottage."

"I've seen it."

"But not in the last few weeks. Come quickly—" And limping, hurrying with a beckoning hand, his broom trailing from the other, Pangall led the way into the south transept. "It was our place. What will become of us? There!"

He pointed through the little door into the yard that lay between the cloisters and the south aisle. Jocelin had

to bow his skullcapped head to pass through it. He stood just inside the door with Pangall under his left shoulder, and he let his jaw drop at the work that had been done. The yard was full of stacks and piles of cut stone. They reached up to the windows between the buttresses. What space the stones left was filled with baulks of timber and the passage between them was no more than a catwalk. On the left of the entrance was a bench against the south wall, with a thatched cover. Glass and lead strip were heaped up under the thatch, and two of the master builder's men were working there, chink, snip, snip.

"D'you see, Father? I can scarcely find my own door!" Jocelin edged after him between the piles.

"This is all they've left me. And for how long, Father?"

In front of the cottage there was left a space no bigger than a chantry, and the wall at the end of it was puddled with slops. Jocelin looked curiously at the cottage since he had never been as close to it before. On earlier inspections, a courteous glance through the door into the yard had been sufficient; for when all was said, church property or not, the yard and the cottage was Pangall's kingdom. Daily the shadow of that cottage lay on the southeast window—like a monument built against the architect's intentions. Now the substance of the cottage was close to his eye, another coming together of inside and out. The cottage hung in the angle of the yard against the cathedral wall, like the accretions under the eaves of an ancient house, where generations of swallows and sparrows have left their marks and the roots of nests. It was a building at once furtive, secret, and blatant; built without permission, tolerated, tacitly unmentioned, because the family that lived there was indispensable. It concealed one buttress and part of a window. Some of the wall was grey