CHAPTER V
FIRE DOWN BELOW

Fire down Below is the third volume of the Sea Trilogy. Unlike the earlier two volumes, it begins abruptly and without any introduction. The reason for writing the first Volume, Rite of Passage was that Talbot wanted to write a diary for his god father. The second volume Close Quarters was also written as a note book containing the experience of the voyage. The third volume does not have these two excuses. However the writer has explained the reason for it at the end of the second volume itself. Close Quarters ends with a "Postscriptum" in which the writer says that he must record in that notebook itself an explanation for the abrupt ending of his journal. Their ship was in the danger of being wrecked after the destruction of the topmost of the ship. Though the officers of the ship had tried, their safety was at peril. The situation became known to them that their safety was at peril. The situation became so grave that Jones, the purser of the ship who had lent a heavy amount of money to others started asking for the return of loan. No body was ready to return his money and finally he came to Talbot asking him
for the payment of different things he had supplied to him. He finally reminded him that he had asked him to provide him some kind of a box in which his diary could be kept safely. The box that he provides was kind of barrel. Soon it became known to others and they also wanted to put one thing or the other by which people might remember them after they were drowned in the sea. In this way Talbot's diary and note book both were put in that barrel.

Towards the end of the "Postscriptum" Talbot reveals that it was written much later:

The reader will have grasped that I, at least, survived the voyage. Not like any possible reader, when I reread what I had written the abrupt end of my journal - call it "book two" - troubled me and does so now. Indeed, to call it a journal is to stretch the term unduly. An attentive reader may well be able to identify the widely separated occasions on which I tried to describe what had happened during a period of days and so bring the thing up to date. I was often writing of the past when much was happening at the moment. A considerable length of time separates the ending of my journal paper this Postscriptum I have been tempted to avoid the
problem of the too abrupt ending by continuing the journal retrospectively so to speak, pretending to have written it in the ship. 1

It is for this very reason that Golding has written this Postscript which explains both the sudden ending of Close Quarters and abrupt beginning of Fire Down Below. He also gives another reason for continuing the description of the Voyage. He remarks that the two volumes had given him an idea of publishing the entire story of the sea voyage in the book form. Then his account would be read by not only those dear to him but by a far wider audience. The desire of print has grown on him. What began at his godfather's behest proceeded by his own growing inclination. He now was finding himself occupied with the desire of any writer to get published. He finds it natural that a writer should have a desire for a name more widely known and admired. The next thing that naturally came before him was what to write about. He however has an answer to this also:

Yet a proper and lengthier description of the remainder of our voyage still remains desirable. In my memory the voyage is a single thing, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Out further adventures
The character of Lieutenant Benet was introduced by the novelist in *Close Quarters*. This was a new character and had arrived on this ship from the other ship Alcyone. Since his arrival he had left a good impression on Captain Anderson. The character of Anderson as described throughout the trilogy is that of a man who was efficient in his work, rough in his behavior and forbidding in his attitude. So it was not easy for a new comer to make a favorable impression on Captain Anderson. That Benet succeeded in doing so speaks volumes in his favor. However his ideas about how to tackle some of the problem that the ship was facing did not go down well with Summers who was the first Lieutenant. Talbot was a friend of Summers and so it was only natural that he should take the side of his friend. He did not know any thing about shipping but accepted willingly what Summers told him. Towards the end of *Close Quarters*, the officers of the ship are divided into two groups—one under the influence of Benet and the other supporting Summers. Captain Anderson favored most of the ideas of Benet and Talbot was a blind supporter of Summers. In *Fire Down Below* this clash between Benet and Summers becomes the focal point of the story.
were no less and perhaps more arduous than the preceding ones. Honestly compels me to promise a plain narrative at some later date which will see the voyage ended and which narrative shall be my "Book three". I cannot pretend to Colley's talent and hope that the strangeness and hazard of the events will compensate for the plainness of the writing. 2

What is common in all these three books is the back ground of the ship, a group of common characters and the hazards faced by the ship. What differentiates these books is the focus that each book makes on separate characters. In *Rite of Passage* the focus was on Parson Colley and the story chiefly described the tragic end of his life. In the second volume the focus was mainly on two characters, Miss Chumley and Deverel. Miss Chumley is important because through her the novelist introduces the love story of Edmund Talbot. Deverel, though not as prominent as Miss Chumley, provides a focal point to the story *Fire Down Below* has perforce to shift its focus on other characters than the ones that were prominent in the first two books. This time the stage is occupied by two characters Benet and Summers.
Fire Down Below begins with a trivial incident which is not important from the point view of plot but which throws light on major characters. Captain Anderson has punished Willis by having him tied to the masthead. The punishment had lasted longer than it was practical because Willies fell unconscious when it became quite long. It was Talbot who saved by pointing out that the boy had perhaps died. At this captain Anderson gave the order to bring Willis down. He was carried to this cabin and later revived. This incident shows the harshness of Anderson's characters. He was strict task master and easily gave punishment if his orders were not carried out. Willis, as Golding has presented him throughout the trilogy, was a young and rather inefficient sailor who often committed mistakes while performing his duty. It was because of him that the main mast of the ship was broken. The scene also presents Talbot in a good light. He was a kind hearted man who could not bear to see any one suffer. Finally in the scene there is reference to Lieutenant Benet who had come down from the height of sixty feet down a rope easily and without much jerk. This shows him as an extremely efficient marine officer.
William Golding has given a very elaborate description of the various activities of the ship which he had learnt while he was serving in the British Navy. He uses several excuses for this. For example in Fire Down Below Talbot asked Summers to take his up the mast because he wanted to find out what it was like to be a common sailor. He was afraid while going up the rope ladder. Summers instructed him to feel the rung with his boot before he put his weight on it. He also asked him not to look down and finally assured him that if he slipped, he was there to catch him. When Talbot reached the top, the first thing that he experienced was the force of the wind. He sat up cautiously and held on with both hands the ropes around him. The novelist then gives a graphic description of the entire scenery. He makes us visualize the entire description of the entire scene with small details. For example in the following passage he gives an account of the lee of the starboard main stage:

Charles and I proceeded then to pace briskly back and forth in 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 bits, on towards the breaks of the of the fo'castle before which the striped foremost 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 foremost was no less than three feet in diameter and where it passed through the deck it was surrounded by a 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 was the first lieutenant watching and shouldered the thing, waited for a few moments, then let it fall on a wedge was standing at little than its fellows.3'

An interesting aspect of Talbot's character comes before us when he insists on shifting to his cabin from where he had come out to leave in the officers' quarters after the suicide wheeler. Summers asks him not to go back to the cabin because it has witnessed two violent deaths in a recent past. First, Parson Colley had died in it because this was the cabin assigned to him. Talbot had moved this cabin after he had vacated his own cabin for Miss Chumley. Though Miss Chumley had not to come his cabin, he himself had not gone back to his own cabin. So he was living in Colley's cabin. At first this thought had troubled, but with passage of time he had become
accustomed to it. Unfortunately Wheeler had shot him self dead in
that very room. So he had left his cabin. Now he wanted to go back
to it. He did not want to be considered a coward. He tells Summers
that he was going to be an administrator in a British Colony and it
would not be good for his reputation if it were known that he had
been scared out of a cabin by fear of haunt.

In Rites of Passage Golding has presented an episode of
flirtation and in Close Quarters he has described a romantic love
story. In Fire Down Below we come across a marriage on the ship.
However there is a difference this time. In the earlier episodes
it was Talbot who was involved, but this time the marriage is between
two elderly people Miss Granham and Mr. Prettiman. Golding had
introduced these two characters in the first volume itself. In fact, it
was Miss Granham whom Talbot had found first among the
passengers on the ship. Miss Granham was a poor woman who had
worked as a governess in an aristocratic family. She was going to
Australia to serve as a governess there. She had been annoyed when
Talbot had referred, to the word 'Instruction' in her context. Mr.
Prettiman was a member of an aristocratic family. He was an elderly
man. It so happened that he was attracted towards Miss Granham
and in the first two volumes of the trilogy we have references to
there relationship. However the novelist had, or we can say Talbot
had, not given much significance to these two characters. It is
only in the third volume that we come to know of their love.

It is more Prettiman’s desire to give Miss Granham, social prestige and financial security than any thing else. This
marriage is between an old, bed ridden elderly man and an un

glamorous spinster.

Mr. Prettiman had met an accident and was bed-ridden for
quite some time now. One day Talbot got the message from Miss
Granham, that Mr. Prettiman wanted to see him. When he went to
his cabin he found him lying in his bunk in a serious condition.

Mr. Prettiman told him that he was dying. When Talbot tried
to assure him that nobody died of a minor accident, Prettiman told
him roughly that he knew that he was dying. It came quite as
a shock to Talbot when Prettiman told him that he was going to
marry Miss Granham, and asked Talbot to act as a witness. The
other witness would be Old meadow. He gives the reason for this:
"The officers of the ship will be distributed round the world. Who knows where they will go? In any case, they are at risk. Certainly this old ship will carry them no farther. You and Old - - will remain at Sydney cove. Do you not understand, Mr. Talbot? Modest as it may be, Miss Granham will inherit my fortune. But without an Impeachable witness and art a distance of eighteen thousand miles from our courts, corrupt as they are."

To ensure that Miss Granham got his property, Prettiman gave Talbot a sealed letter to be used in emergency. He told him that in the letter he had mentioned that he had been maintaining a physical relationship with Miss Granham. Talbot was shocked to hear this but later on he realized that perhaps Prettiman said so only to provide Miss Granham a financial security.

The description of the marriage is unique. A marriage at sea in itself was something uncommon and when it was between two elderly people one of which was bed-ridden it made the marriage all the more uncommon. However the people on the ship knew that the man was dying. So his reason for marrying could not be one for jesting comment.
Talbot had still not accepted the situation fully. He believed that Miss Granham was by nature a woman of great dignity, intelligence and austerity. He holds that such a woman should not have accepted the situation so easily. On the day of marriage Miss Granham was visited early by other ladies abroad the ship. The whole female section of the ship was determined that she should be properly dressed for the occasion. The congregation which assembled in the lobby was a mixed one. Passengers from the lower section of the ship had also joined there. Mr. Bricklebank was suitably dressed and so were other men. Six bells rang in the noon watch and just at that time captain Anderson appeared. Glum as ever if not more so, Benet followed him, carrying under his arm a large brown covered volume which was in fact the ship’s log. When Miss Granham appeared on the scene every one was surprised to find her beautifully dress in white. She carried a bouquet which consisted of real flowers from captain Anderson’s flower pot.

Captain Anderson who was not accustomed to such occasion made a blunder at the beginning. He raised his prayer book but in place of the marriage service he started reading the burial service.
Miss Granham went from pink to white when she heard it. Captain Anderson swiftly corrected his mistake Mr. East gave the bride’s hand. After that Prettiman put the marriage ring on Miss Granham’s finger. Anderson neither congratulated Mrs. Prettiman the nor felicitated the bride. Talbot however felicitated Mrs. Prettiman in a low voice and touched Prettiman hands which was cold. This is how the marriage was solemnized.

The central conflict in Fire Down Below is between Lieutenant Summers and Lieutenant Benet. Summers is the first Lieutenant on the ship and so is senior to Benet. Benet, on the other hand, has gained the confidence of captain Anderson. Since his arrival on this ship he has opposed Summers on several accounts. This has led to a division among officers of the ship. Benet himself admits it too.

Whatever it is, we are fated, he and I, to be on either side of the fence, backed by those who think I am saving our lives on one hand and those who think I took to big a risk on the other. 5

The main reason of the conflict between the two is their ideas about the mainmast. In the matter of removing weed from the
bottom of the ship Benet's idea had been successful. Summers had not agreed with him even then. However the weed had actually been removed from the ship. This had raised Benet in the opinion of captain Anderson. That is why he supports Benet in the case of formats. In the storm the foremost had split the deck and by using chocks wedge and props had reduced its movement a little. Benet now wants to reduce it altogether. When Talbot asks Summers what the danger was in it, Summers says that if there is any mistake the foot of the mast may slip and go through the ship's bottom. Moreover Benet's method involves the use of fire because he wants to use red-hot metal. Talbot says that he had seen his father do the same thing to the old cottage down by the river when he used iron bars maid red-hot which pulled some bulging walls together. Summers asks him if the buildings were made of wood. When Talbot denied it, Summers says that in the case of the ship it was through wood and not through bricks that the red-hot iron bars had to pass. In this case the bars will extend red-hot through four solid foot of timber. Benet, says that he will have holes bored wider than the rods and thinks that the heat will produce nothing inside the wooden block but a thin layer of charcoal. And this is what worries Summers.
Listen to me, Edmund! We are still in mortal danger even if the mast should not go through the bottom! Have you watched a fire back as the fire dies down? How the sparks move through the layer of soot on the metal as if they were alive? Have you never seen a fire, apparently dead, brought to life again and flare up? It will be shut in there in the shoe. We are to soil on gaily with that added to all the rest! Added to the cranky hull, the jury ring, the distance, the terrible weather towards which we are making our clumsy way and which we need because it is the only force which will get us to land and shelter before the fresh water and even the food run out.6

Captain Anderson does not see any danger in it as the First Lieutenant does. The entire operation is done with precision. Describing it Talbot writes that in that area of the ship there was light and noise. Some of the light was smoky and flared rapidly now and then. The work became a steady beating with a hammer on iron as if the ship was being shod. Soon the work took on another sound a dull thumping on wood. There were structure of huge ropes to stop it from moving, there was a thunderous sound followed by more banging on iron and then wood. Between the bang and clanking
sound the whole operation was performed. Finally came captain Anderson’s booming voice congratulating Benet.

Talbot moved towards the mast and saw Benet standing there. He wore an expression of triumph.

Evidently the operation had been successful. The huge cylinder of the foremast had come down through the deck head and appeared to enter a square block of wood. The foremast now was stable.

A sad out come of the whole episode was a humiliating reprimand that Summers received from captain Anderson. He had called Summers and ordered him in a very curt tone that in future he was to stop obstructing Benet. Summers felt so humiliated that he was quite stunned. It was in such a condition that Talbot found him:

Charles was sitting on the edge of his bunk. His hands on either side grasped the wooden edge. He was staring at or through the opposite bulkhead, His eyes did not or turn towards me. His face under the tan of expose was sallow and drawn.
One striking feature of the sea trilogy is its graphic and often terrifying description of turbulence in the sea. In the first part as well as in the second part we come across passage describing the violent sea and its impacts on the passengers. However, the most terrific description of the storm in sea has been presented in *Fire Down Below*. As usual the description of the entire episode comes from Talbot:

What woke me from a dream of cliffs and slopes was a shattering blow. I was on the deck by my bunk from which I had fallen or been thrown, and as I scrabbled to get up, my canvas chair tipped over on me so that we went sliding together to thump the bulkhead my writing flap. I got to my feet some how and the angle at which my lantern with its loaded base now stood frightened me into a moment or two of near—immobility. I could only interpret the angle as information we are now sliding backwards—making a stern board!—into the sea and should vanish there.8’

Talbot was bewildered. He was hanging from his bunk. He had some idea that the ship was under water but he did not known what exactly was happening. He heard noises from other cabins. The
Like children were screaming and so were the women. Men were shouting. There were other noises too-booming and begging of sails and shattering of glasses. As soon as Talbot took his hands off the rail he went tumbling the length which served not so much to light up the ship as illuminate dense clouds surrounding. There arose a very high tide before the ship which looked to Talbot as a huge black mountain. In the first few moments the one astern changed shaped and seemed to sink. As the mountain of water sank away Talbot felt a stronger and stronger pull on his limbs so that once more he seemed to be hanging. Soon another mountain wave sprang up. Some how Talbot managed to come out of his reach the quarter deck. There he found Summers hanging from the starboard side of the wheel, bearing down. Seeing Talbot he shouted seeking his help. Talbot ran towards the wheel added his weight to that of Summers. Finally the wheel began to move. More than once they moved the wheel and thus managed to steady the ship. This however was not the end. Writing about another such experience Talbot says:

I started round me. We were rising at another range—they must have been a quarter of a mile apart—and saw nothing but black, horrible flint with a sullen dawn sky over it, dully
shining flint, liquid flint – how to convey the sheer horror of size? For after all, the three moving mountains among which we were now living were nothing but ripples – yet magnified multiplied in size past the huge, the colossa! They were a new dimension in the nature of water. This nature did seem to allow us to live – just; was not inimical, would not, so to say, go out of its way to harm us. 9

Slowly the dawn began to appear. The period between day and night was a point of suspension. Talbot was still not very sure of himself. Beneath his feet he felt a slippery liquid. He was unable to steady himself.

The entire description of this episode is very vivid. This however is not only such description in Fire Down Below. In fact, the description of the ship’s encounter with an ice cliff is even more evocative. The scene begins on a low note and goes on gathering momentum till the strain becomes almost unbearable. While on a watch along with Summers Talbot happened to look towards starboard side and say in a casual manner that it was almost dawn. He was surprised when he found Summers grow pale. On questioning him Talbot came to know that the light reflected was not
because of the dawn but because of a huge range of ice cliffs. It was then that great furor broke out. Captain Anderson immediately appeared on the scene. As he was asking the summers and then Talbot how far the range was, the ship came face to face with the range. The captain ordered all hands to be on deck. Someone started ringing the ship's bell announcing an emergency. The men rushed from all quarters. Even passengers came out of their cabins but Summers ordered them to keep out of the way. The captain had given an order to set every possible. The wheel was spun to starboard. As a result the ship leaned towards the starboard side and the wind roared over the larboard beam. Talbot realized that once again, as in the days of the terrible storm, the masts were bending, but to starboard this time. It was not because there was storm but because they had set a large number of sails. The spray which had deluged the ship from astern now flooded the ship from the side. Summers came to the captain and reported with dismay that it was not an ordinary iceberg. It lay squarely north and south and there seemed no end to it. The cliff must be somewhere between a hundred and two hundred feet high. Talbot was almost numb:
How can a man react, he has no service to offer, no counsel to give when he sees such monstrosities and knows that presently, unless there is a miracle, he will be smashed to pieces among them?

That more than Antarctic chill became a settle rigor which sealed me in my place by the rail of the quarterdeck, careless of wind or spray or green water or anything but peril. This was a horror of natural and indifferent but overwhelming power with which our own ridiculous wood and canvas had nothing to do. We might end as a child's toy, washed up, smashed.10'

Golding makes a skillful combination of the scene describing the crisis and the description of the impact of this crisis on the passengers. It seemed to every one that death was now inevitable. In the face of death different people behaved in different manners. Jones, the carpenter of the ship had moved towards a boat in the ship and was sitting there in the hope that the boat would some how save him. Captain Anderson was agitated to see it because it was sure to damage the moral of others. He sent Taylor to Jones to remove him from their. It was an irony of fate both of them died on the spot when a splinter of the ice berg hit the ship. A very touching scene was presented by Mr. and Mrs. Prettiman. They tried
to maintain dignity in that crisis. Many other passengers were in consolable.

It is a remarkable example of the narrative technique which brings before us every detail of the crisis. He leaves the final moments of the crisis deliberately vague. This adds to the impact of the scene:

I had no rational appreciation of what was happening; only the incomprehensible sight of it! How to explain the disorganized fury of the sea, the towers, pinnacles, the bursts of water, that had replaced those steadily marching billows which had swung under and past us for so many days together? For now it seemed that those billows were flung back at us. Columns of green water and spray climbed the ice cliff and fell back from it. Wind against wind, wave against wave, fury feeding on itself — I tried to think of my parents of my Beloved objects, but it would not do. The ice was above us! Ice fell, leapt up monstrously from beneath the foam, and still we swept in towards that hideous, undercut and rotten wall. Some of our slacks were hurried towards and long the wall fast as horses might have drawn us. If there was anything regular about our
situation it was in the explosive falls of ice from the walls of this mortal and impregnable city! 11’

To Talbot it seemed as if the whole nature had gone mad. Clinging to the rails of deck he watched incomprehensibly everything that took place before his eyes. It was, for him, nothing short of miracle that the ship escaped the final disaster.

Since *Fire Down Below* is the concluding part of the Sea Trilogy Golding ties up all the loose ends in this part. That is the reason this novel is more eventful than the earlier two novels. It is his recovery! He and I, you see- we are rendered conscious by the situation – this is all mad, you see, but true! 12’

Later on Mr. Prettiman asks Talbot to tear up the letter he had given to him. This is a sign that he was recovering fast. Both these fellows then engaged in lively and philosophical discussion.

The greatest ups and downs come in the life of Talbot himself. When the ship reaches the shore he goes to meet the Lt. Governor and presents his papers to him. Because of his connection with
nobility he is extended a warm welcome by the official. He also looks forward to his life in the island with excitement. Then comes a turn in his life. He comes to know through a letter that his god father is dead. This changes his condition both socially and politically very much.

He is now a nonentity. We also now wait to see what turns his life takes. Then once again the novelist makes a swing for the high. Another letter informs him that his godfather had left his politically constituency for him. Thus like a fairy tale his life changes over night. He is now going to be a member of the British parliament. This changes his condition so much that even the Lt. Governor becomes respectful toward him.

The greatest change however that comes in his life is that he is able to meet Miss Chumley once again. Their ship had gone to India and now has come to Australia. The entire description is highly romantic. Talbot accompanies Miss Chumley on her walks. The culmination of their love is marriage. It is with his marriage that the novel ends:
What more is there to say? So must end this account of Edmund Talbot's journey to the ends of the earth and his attempt to learn Tarpaulin! Yet I divine in my unborn readers an unease. Something is missing, is there not? The bishop could not consent to our journeying from India to England while still unmarried. It would be an extremely bad example set in a part of the world only too open to license of every kind! He himself very cordially offered to perform the ceremony! So, my dear readers my rest contently assured: there did come a day when I leapt ashore in India from a pinnacle. A "young person" under a rosy parasol stood, as it might be twenty years away. Valuable Janet was behind her and a group of dark servants. Above the rosy parasol a greater was help and spread. But she took no heed of the sun when she saw me. I swept off my hat—she broke into a run— and your great—great-great-great-great-grandmother fairly sprang into my arms! 13

Death has been a major event in the earlier two novels of the Sea Trilogy also but here it leaves a most moving impact. The first novel it was the death of Parson Coiley that was the central event of the novel. In Close Quarters it was the death of Wheeler. This time it is the death of Lt. Summers that shocks us while the earlier two
deaths had been suicide, this time it is an accident. The death of Summers is preceded by the captain of a ship. Since he had a humble origin, this dream was doomed to be unrealized.

Talbot had promised him that he would do everything in his power to help his friend. So when meets the Lt. Governor he makes a request to that effect. He is surprised to know that captain Anderson and Lt. Benet have also made a similar request. In fact the Lt. Governor had asked Lt. Benet to take the charge of the ship, but he had refused and suggested the name of Summers in his place. In this way Golding gives a finishing touch to the character of Benet also. Ultimately Summers is made the captain of the ship. He is extremely happy. It is then the tragedy strikes. The fire that Benet had left deep inside the ship engulfs the whole ship as well as Lt. Summers.

The Sea trilogy, in its final analysis is a master piece of Golding. It has a very engrossing narrative style. It has a whole range of character from farcical to tragic. Above all, it is full of adventures at sea. As a sea voyage it is memorable.
REFERENCES


2. Ibid, p.484

3. Ibid, p.496

4. Ibid, p.550

5. Ibid, p.504

6. Ibid, p.507

7. Ibid, p.586

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9. Ibid, p.642

10. Ibid, p.688

11. Ibid, p.696

12. Ibid, p.655

13. Ibid, p.759