

The Light

What would you do if you knew somebody was in trouble, trapped on a rocky outcrop by a rapidly rising tide and with nobody else to save them? What if you thought that they might be spies? That was the dilemma that my best friend Joan and I faced. I suppose I'd better take you back to the beginning to give you a better idea of what I mean, and maybe then you'll understand why we did what we did. It all happened last night...

Earlier that afternoon, we'd been scouring the beach for bits of scrap metal or other flotsam that we might be able to sell to the scrap men in the village. Ever since Dad had gone off to fight in the war, Mum has been trying her hardest to make ends meet, but it's getting harder every day. King George isn't doing anything to help us, Mum says, though she says it with a whisper. Anyway, we were digging around when we stumbled into a hidden nook in the cliffs. The storm was growing outside, and the light was draining from the sky. Back at the top of the hill, we could see the gas lamps being lit along the main road, a sure sign that the night was settling in early. Out at sea, the waves were climbing higher, each one wearing a jewelled tiara of foaming white surf. It was not a night to be out and unprotected.

Suddenly, I saw a flash of light, maybe a hundred yards out to sea. There weren't too many boats that used this part of the coast, not since the war started and they'd all headed south. This didn't seem like a boat's lantern, anyway. It wasn't bright enough, it was too narrow a beam. Boat lanterns are broad-beamed to flood the ocean to look for drowning men or lost cargo. This had been a narrow beam, more like a torch. Joan had been too busy picking at her nails to notice, but I knew what I'd seen. I kept my eyes focussed on the unseen object until they watered.

Then, it flashed again. This time Joan saw it as well. "It's somebody on the Skull," she said, horrified. I understood why. The Skull is a small pile of rocks several hundred yards out from shore. If you look at it from the top of the hill, it looks kind of like a skull if you squint a bit, hence the name. When the tide is out, children climb over the rocks and splash in the rock pools; when the tide is in like it was now, you do not want to be on the Skull.

Now the light was regularly flashing and with a pattern. It would alternate between long, bright



beams and short flashes. We counted three short flashes, then three long ones, before finally three more short bursts. There was a pause, then it would repeat again. I've read enough Sherlock Holmes to know Morse code, and I knew exactly what it meant.

"S.O.S!" I screamed. "Somebody is out there, and they're trapped."

"What if it's a spy?" Joan quivered. "There's a war on. Maybe they were spying and got trapped."

It certainly made sense; nobody in the village would be anywhere near the Skull at this time of day. We all knew when the tides were heading in, and nobody wanted to be trapped out there. It was almost certain death. On the other hand, what if it was just somebody who'd gone out there on a dare and got stuck?

Like I said, those flashing lights had presented us with quite the quandary. Before I tell you what we did, what do you think you would have done?

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which word in the text tells you that the tide is rising quickly?
2. Which metaphor in the text gives you an image of the top of the waves?
3. Find a word that tells you a boat's beam is wide.
4. Find and copy two different words from the text that mean "problem".
5. Which word tells you that the characters couldn't see where the flash was coming from?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

i

Why do you think her Mum says that the king isn't helping in a whisper?

S

Why is the pile of rocks called the Skull?

R

When do children play on the Skull?

R

How many short flashes were there in total?

P

What would you have done in the situation

Answers:

1. Rapidly
2. Each one [wave was] wearing a jewelled tiara of foaming white surf.
3. Broad
4. Dilemma/Quandary
5. Unseen

I: She doesn't want to speak out against the king – it is not commonplace to do so.

S: When you look at it from above, it looks like a skull.

R: When the tide is out

R: 6