

Three winters ago the lighthouse had stopped working, but Mr Vale still climbed the hill every night at dusk to switch it on.

Sometimes the people of the town looked at him from their windows. Some shook their heads. Others looked the other way. Ships that needed guiding no longer came into the harbour, and the council had written him twice already asking when he would send back the keys.

He never replied to them.

At precisely six-thirty he crossed the narrow road with the same cautious step, his coat buttoned up to his throat whatever the weather. The gulls wheeled above in the summer. In winter the wind bent him over sideways. Still he went up.

The lighthouse stood upon the brink of black cliffs, where the sea scraped perpetually at rock. On the windows was a pallid crust of salt. Paint flaked from the railings in long curling strips.

He went in. The spiral staircase creaked under his boots.

The lamp sat waiting at the top, silent.

Years before it had bellowed into life with the pull of a lever. Now the gears were frozen solid.

The lens was clouded with dust and only bits of his face showed when he bent close.

He cleaned it up every night, anyway.

He sat polishing the glass slowly, cloth in hand, moving around the room as the light faded outside. Sometimes he spoke low. Not really sentences. Just a few scattered observations.

"Storm's a-commin'."

Or else:—

"Cold tonight.

Like someone was standing there listening.

Down below waves crashed hard enough to shiver the walls.

One night a boy from town followed him up the hill, a torch too big for his hands.

"Why do you still come here?" the boy enquired.

Mr. Vale fumbled with the wick of a lantern that would not burn.

"Because it's like leaving a porch light on," he said.

The boy scowled. "For whom?"

The old man did not answer immediately, however. He gazed out across the horizon where fog blended sea and sky into one endless grey line.

Then he put a hand against the cold glass of the great lamp.

"In case someone is still trying to find their way home."

After that the boy stood quietly.

Beneath them the tide pulled over the rocks like slow respiration.

And no light came to the water But the lighthouse kept awake till morning.