Andrew J. Green

THE SIGNAL

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The breakwater extended in a graceful arc nearly a quarter of a mile into the bay. Near the end of it was a small lighthouse that stood out against the dark blue water like a white temple. The breakwater was divided at the middle into two parts. The half near the shore was a long line of massive stones, through which a few rods from shore ran a narrow channel for motor boats. The water in the channel was perhaps thirty feet deep. A heavy plank, lying loose upon two large flat stones, served as a bridge across the opening. As nearly all the rocks were flat, it was easy enough to walk over them when they were dry. The more distant half of the structure, from which two boys were fishing, was composed of massive beams a foot square that, securely riveted together with great steel bolts, stretched along to the end in section after section. Massive beams also extended down the side of the breakwater all the way to the bottom a hundred feet or more below. So solidly and scientifically was the breakwater constructed that no storm seemed likely to injure it.

The boys were at a point on the seaward side of the structure almost midway between the rocks and the lighthouse. For some time they sat in silence and dangled their feet over the breakwater.

The day was warm and muggy. The sun, shining dully from out of a hazy west, was sinking slowly into the black clouds that were already forming on the horizon. Sundown of a warm day usually brings good fishing; it was not long before the boys were rewarded for their patience. It was great fun pulling in the fish, and the time passed quickly. The sun set among purple, golden-rimmed clouds. Twilight crept gently over the scene. The clouds grew blacker and piled up on one another, but the boys were in no hurry to go home.

Jim was fifteen years old. Henry, younger by three years, was quick to follow his brother's lead in most of his doings. He worshiped Jim.

A slight breeze had arisen, and the waves were already splashing against the breakwater. But the boys were so busy fishing that neither of them noticed how late it was getting. The sun had been down perhaps fifteen minutes before Henry, whose hands were cold, broke the silence.

"It's getting chilly, Jim," he said. "Let's go home."

Jim's gaze wandered off to the west. "We'll do that, Hank," said he.

The great black clouds that were piling up higher and higher were assuming an ominous aspect. The breeze was stiffening every minute. So the boys began hurriedly to reel in their lines.

Then the first of what proved to be a long succession of misfortunes overtook them. Jim discovered that he had a fish. A sudden yank, a wriggle and a succession of flip-flops told him that it was a four-inch perch and good for nothing. It somehow managed to tangle Jim's line in Henry's, and then there was a pretty state of affairs. The more the boys reeled in their lines the worse the tangle became. They were at last forced to get down on their knees on the breakwater and pull the lines up by hand. It was slow work, for they had out more than fifty feet; but at last they succeeded, and Jim threw the little culprit back into the water.

The lines lay in a tangled maze all round them. Such a tangle! There were knots of every description; hard knots, figure-of eights, slips, bowlines, and so on down to a clove hitch round a splinter. The lines were expensive, and the boys had no desire to cut them. So they sat down patiently and began the work of untangling. Sometimes they bumped their heads together. Often they were able to pull out yards of line, only to come to a sudden halt and find a mass half an inch thick securely tied in a hard knot. It was almost dark before the lines were back on the reels again. The task ended, the boys heaved a great sigh of relief.

But it was still necessary for them to pick up the tackle that lay scattered all round them, put the promiscuous hooks and sinkers into the tackle box, put the reels away and unjoint the rods. All that took time. At last, just when they were ready to go, Jim laid his hand on his brother's shoulder and groaned.

"What's the matter, Jim?" asked Henry.

"Come on, Hank," replied his brother; "let's go up to the lighthouse and get the lunch basket. My watch is in it." Leaving the rods and the tackle box behind them, they walked off together.

Although it was only a few rods to the lighthouse, it seemed to them like a mile. Twilight was fast passing into actual darkness, and the boys already began to regret the half hour they had spent in untangling their lines. Suddenly the automatic acetylene light flashed out from the turret above them, gleaming in the dusk a dull lurid red, and then as suddenly disappearing. It would continue to flash at intervals of two seconds all through

the night. Henry, who was struggling hard to keep up with Jim's rapid strides, thought they should never reach the lighthouse, but they were going at a lively rate, and they actually covered the distance in six or seven minutes. Jim lost no time in getting the luncheon basket. As they turned to go back and faced the long stretch of breakwater before them they were startled by the muffled roar of thunder. Low in the west a great streak of forked lightning played across the sky, lighted up the massive clouds and made them stand out for a moment in vivid relief. Piled high on one another, they were black and threatening. The sight so astonished the boys that they paused for a moment to gaze at it awe-struck; then they proceeded hurriedly on their way.

Recent photograph of the breakwater on
Little Traverse Bay at Petoskey, Michigan

Although they has to go more carefully in the darkness, they soon reached the box that contained the tackle. They had a good deal to carry. Jim had the luncheon basket on one arm and the fish basket on the other; Henry trudged along beside him, carrying the rods and the box of tackle. The walking was not easy, and they could hardly have seen their way except for the occasional vivid flashes of lightning and the intermittent glare from the lighthouse. To make matters worse, a drizzling rain began that made the whole surface of the breakwater wet and slippery. As the boys walked along with wet and soggy clothing they had more and more occasion to regret the time they had lost.

At last they reached the rock-built part of the breakwater. As the boys clambered down upon the great stones they were immersed in a sudden cloud of spray. The wind had been steadily increasing, and the waves were now large and rolling in with great violence. They dashed against the rocks with a constant crack! crack! crack! and here and there threw up little mists of spray.

Until that time the boys had really been in no immediate danger, but now a fearful thought occurred to Jim. The little plank bridge across the channel was a feeble thing at best; such waves as those might wash it away at any moment. There was no time to lose.

Jim dropped his baskets between two rocks and then, taking the rods and the box of tackle from his younger brother, put them with the baskets.

"The bridge! The bridge!" he shouted into Henry's ear, but, although he used all of his strength, his voice sounded faint and far away.

Henry grasped his hand tightly. Then, sometimes almost running, sometimes going almost on their hands and knees, the boys traveled the remaining distance over the slippery rocks. Twice the lightning revealed the great waves. Now the boys were almost at the channel. They could hear the waves rushing and roaring through the opening in a seething whirlpool. If the bridge were only there! But the bridge was gone.

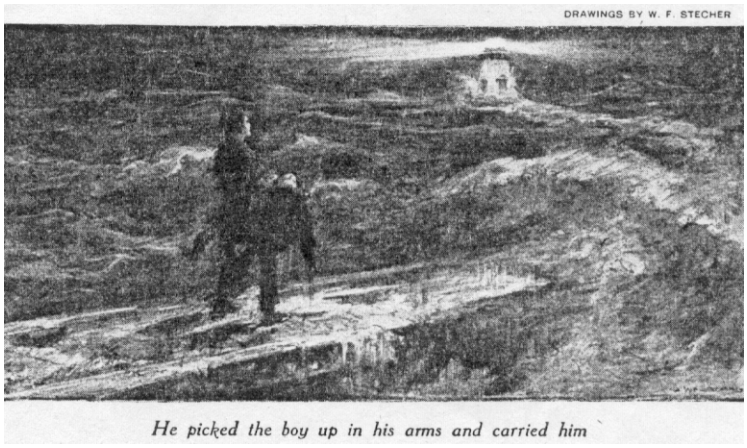
With sinking hearts they turned once more and gazed at the long stretch of breakwater in front of them. Far ahead the red light flashed out into the darkness. Henry tightened his grip on Jim's hand, and the elder boy returned the pressure as reassuringly as he could. There was no chance of escape. They knew that they must spend the night on the breakwater. The lighthouse was their only hope. Once more they started back together over the rocks.

The wind was now blowing a gale. It whipped their wet clothing against their bodies and chilled them through and through. It blew into their faces great clouds of spray that nearly blinded them. The slanting rain, which was coming down in torrents, stung their faces harshly. The footing, too, on the slippery rocks was anything but secure. Jim stumbled and fell once; Henry, twice. The din and uproar of the storm was tremendous. The great waves crashed and pounded against the rocks. Every minute they increased in size and in violence. Weak and weary, the boys stumbled on. Then there came another sound–a heavy, increasing, voluminous roar, followed by the hollow boom of great masses of falling water.

They had almost reached the beams when a heavy cloud of mist and spray suddenly immersed them and left them strangled and gasping for breath. It was a moment or two before they recovered. They could still hear the heavy roar. Then a bolt of lightning hissed across the sky, and a sharp peal of thunder rent the air. An extremely brilliant and prolonged play of flashes followed the sound. The lighthouse, a sentinel ghost, loomed up far ahead. The bay was a surging mass of enormous whitecapped waves. With terrifying speed, a great swelling mass of tumultuous water swept round the arc of the breakwater. On it came, roaring along, with its peak towering higher and higher, until it assumed gigantic proportions. Just where the wooden part of the breakwater met the rocks it broke in a great waterfall and fell heavily on the beams.

This time the boys were almost drowned. Jim was well aware of the danger that threatened them. Once caught beneath that deluge of water, they would be washed mercilessly into the bay. For an instant he thought of the deep bay, the currents, the dark waters; then he snapped his jaws together with sudden determination. Henry felt such a grip on his wrist as he had not experienced that evening as Jim dragged him by main force over the rocks right up to the very verge of the beams. There they stopped, crouched low and waited. Again the swell was roaring along! Closer! Closer! Once more the awful deluge; tons of water poured down the breakwater just in front of them; and then they were immersed in the immense wave that was a mere residual flow of the first one.

Scarcely had the water leaked through between the beams or poured off the other side when Jim, dragging a weak, limp bundle behind him, rose and stepped on the wooden part. He had to cross thirty feet or more of breakwater before the next swell, which was already rumbling beside the lighthouse. He picked the boy up in his arm and carried him. He staggered; he almost fell. He ran a few steps and suddenly grew faint and weak. The swell roared sullenly. He knew that it was already rounding the arc. He must keep on. A few more steps; a few more; a few more. It seemed as if a mountain were about to fall on top of him. Then with Henry in his arms he ran again and staggered and fell and accidentally wedged his left hand into a crack between the beams. The swell was roaring–nearer–alongside–*past*! And then it broke–behind him!



He picked the boy up in his arms and carried him

How long he lay there he never knew. He did know, however, that for a long time he had a sense of swimming in a vast ocean, and that he kept clutching Henry tightly to save him from drowning. At last he became dimly conscious of a pain in his wrist and struggled to free it from the crevice. The pain aroused him; once more he realized their dangerous position and tore his lacerated and bleeding hand free from the crack between the beams.

Henry did not know until afterwards how he came to awaken with a glaring red light shining right in his eyes. He found himself in a little round room that had four square windows diagonally opposite one another, with the red light gleaming through inches of polished glass in the center. Then for a while all was darkness.

There was a tremendous booming outside. There were crashes such as he had never heard before. It was like cannonading. There seemed to be a terrible blowing, too, as of a cyclone tearing through a forest. The room itself trembled and shook. When the light flashed on he saw Jim standing before one of the windows, and it began to dawn on his mind where they were.

"Jim!" he called weakly. "Jim! Jim!" His brother heard not a word, and the next moment he sank back into a huddled mass against the wall.

Jim knew what the crashes and the booming meant. It was an hour since he had dragged himself and Henry up the circular staircase inside the lighthouse; and in that hour the storm had not abated. On the contrary, it had steadily increased in violence. The lightning did not flash so often, but the wind blew more fiercely. Jim had observed the crested swell gleaming faintly in the red rays of the beacon as it leaked out of the night far down the breakwater. In the interval between one swell and the next waves immense almost beyond imagination poured over the beams. Some of the beams had already been torn up; more would follow. A complete section near the lighthouse was almost entirely demolished, and the building itself quaked with every shock. It was a matter of only another hour or two before it would go crashing into the bay.

Meanwhile the great red light flashed at even intervals. Half conscious, Henry opened his eyes with the light each time. There was something peculiar in Jim's actions, but he did not know just what.

"There's something queer about that light," observed the brakeman of freight No. 7, peering out of the station room into the storm.

"There is that, by George!" responded the telegraph operator, Pat Morgan, a few seconds later. It skips every other beat. Just see that, now."

"By heaven, there's a man out there!" shouted the brakeman.

A few seconds later the life-saving station at Glasgow Straits was a scene of great bustle. A white boat was quickly and efficiently loaded on special electric No. 42, and the car pulled in behind No. 7 before half an hour was up. Incidentally, a life-saving crew of five brawny men enjoyed a thirty-mile ride.

"Where are they?" shouted Capt. Larabee to Morgan, as the husky seaman leaped from

the car.

“The lighthouse,” said Morgan coolly, “and you’d better hurry!”

So it came to pass not a great while afterwards that Jim and Henry had a ride on a breeches buoy about twenty minutes before a certain automatic acetylene light near the end of a breakwater forever ceased to shine.

Andrew J. Green

THE OLD SECRETARY

Originally published in the October 1942 edition of *College English* and republished as part of a collection entitled *Essays in Miniature*.

For three or more generations the old secretary that stood in the parlor, its pigeonholes stuffed with old letters and receipted bills, was for most of America its intellectual and spiritual powerhouse. For on the two shelves below was the library, the domestic center of America's literary life.

Few, if any, of the twenty or more volumes had ever seen a bookstore. The theological division, consisting of the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*, was acquired through the church; in addition, mother had received *In His Steps* as a prize for reciting "Tell me that I hate the bowl, Hate is a feeble word" at a Children's Day program. The political section boasted a ten-volume set of *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, accepted in lieu of the last payment on a horse. Economics was represented by *Hog Breeding* and *Poultry Raising for Profit*, purchased through the mail-order catalogue. The door-to-door agent, who for sixty years wandered through the highways and byways of America spreading sweetness and light, worked Aunt Sue for a dictionary and persuaded father to complete the reference section with that indispensable compendium of all knowledge, *The Book of Facts*, available to the intelligent electorate of America at $4.90, $5.90, $9.90, and, in black morocco with red corners and pages edged with gold, $14.90. Belles-lettres, already graced by the *Elementary Spelling Book*, a McGuffey reader, and Uncle Irwin's bequest of a broken set of Washington Irving, was further augmented, under the impulse of the salesman's superb educational patter, by the *Home Book of Verse*. This last had the unqualified indorsement of three elementary-school teachers in the near-by village and of the superintendent of schools. Biological science was fully represented by a set of books about what a young boy, young girl, young man, young husband, etc., should know. A young boy found *What a Young Boy Should Know* rather dull and *What a Young Girl Should Know* curiously vague and disappointing.

Bay Street in Petoskey, Michigan, as it appeared c. 1912

Recent photograph of the house at 808 Howard Street, Petoskey, where the author lived as an adolescent.

But *Pilgrim's Progress*, with its pictures of Christian's battle with Apollyon and of angels throwing a sinner into the sulphureous pit, might fascinate him. And in the *Home Book of Verse* he became acquainted with Felicia Hemans and Helen Hunt Jackson and Casabianca and Norval of the Grampian Hills and Lady Clara Vere de Vere and John P. Robinson, who wouldn't vote for Governor B., and the sailor who was cook and captain and bos'n and midshipmite and crew of the captain's gig. And from Robert Sherk's library he could borrow *Black Beauty* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ten Nights in a Barroom*.

Today the old secretary, which was for more than half a century the cultural sparkplug of America, has been supplanted by the radio and the magazine rack, and there is a box of textbooks up in the attic.