

The Signal Man

Charles Dickens from *Christmas Stories*, 1866

When I first called down to him, I was so steeped in the glow of an angry sunset, that I had to shade my eyes before I saw him at all. ‘Hulloa! Below there!’

His figure was in shadow; he was standing at the door of his signal-box, with a flag in his hand. But instead of looking up to where I stood—on the top of the steep cutting over his head—he turned round and looked the other way, down the Line. There was something remarkable in his manner of doing so, but I could not, for my life, have said what.

I called again. ‘Is there any path by which I can come down and explore?’

He turned round again, looked up, and saw me; but made no reply. Just then, there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, changing to a violent pulsation: then an oncoming rush that caused me to start back, as though it had force to draw me down. When such vapour as rose to my height had passed me, I looked down again; he was refurling his flag, which he had shown while the train went by. And he was regarding me with fixed attention.

I called a third time: ‘Is there a way down?’

He now motioned with his flag towards a rough zig-zag path, which I followed. The cutting was extremely deep, through stone that became oozy and clammy; the way down was long enough for me to recall the singular air of reluctance with which he had pointed out the path.

He was standing between the rails by which the train had passed, as if he were waiting for me. He had his left hand at his chin, and his right hand held his elbow. His attitude was of such expectation and watchfulness that I stopped, wondering at it; then I drew nearer.

His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged rock, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way, a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon; the shorter perspective, in the other direction, terminating in a red Danger-light, and an entrance to a black tunnel. The place had an earthy deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world.

I walked nearer to him—near enough to have touched him—and he had not stirred. Then, without removing his eyes from mine, he stepped back, one step...

A visitor must be a rarity, I said; not an unwelcome one, I hoped? I am far from sure of the words I used: there was something in the man that daunted me. He now directed a most curious look towards the red Danger-light near the tunnel’s mouth: looked all around it, as if there were something missing from it: then looked back at me.

I inquired whether that light was in his charge?

He spoke, at last. ‘Don’t ye *know* it is?’

The monstrous thought came into my mind, that this was not a man, but a spirit. *I* stepped back.

But in doing so, I detected, in his eyes some latent fear of me. This put my monstrous thought to flight. ‘You look at me,’ said I, ‘as if you had a dread of me!’

‘I thought I had seen you before.’~

‘Oh, where?. .. *There*, at the red light? My good fellow, what should *I* do at the mouth of a tunnel? I never was there, you may swear!’

‘I think I may swear it.... Aye, I am *sure* I may.’

His manner cleared, like my own. He took me into his signal-box, where there was a fire. He replied to my remarks with readiness—yes, exactitude was what was required of him: to change this signal, to trim that light. He was several times interrupted by the electric bell, and had to read off messages: I observed him to be remarkably exact and vigilant ... Except that twice, while he was speaking to me—twice he broke off, with a fallen colour, turned his face to the electric bell—at a moment when it had *not* rung—got up, opened the door, and looked out: towards the mouth of the tunnel— towards the red Danger-light. Both times, he came back to the fire with the same inexplicable air upon him, as when I had first seen him.

Said I, when I rose to leave him, ‘You almost make me think that I have met with a contented man!’ I must acknowledge that I said it to draw him out.

‘I used to be, sir... but wi’ this trouble—’ He would have recalled the words if he could.

‘Trouble?’ said I, ‘what trouble?’

‘‘Tis a hard thing to speak of, sir.’ He opened the door, and wished me good night. ‘Before you go, sir... When you stood at the top there..., what made you call out “Halloa, below there!”?’

‘Heaven knows! I did shout something to that effect. Because I saw you, below! ... What? . . . But what other reason could I possibly have?’

He hesitated, then beckoned me in again, and closed the door. ‘I have made up my mind, sir, that ye shall not have to ask me twice what troubles me.’

We sat again by the fire: he spoke in little above a whisper. ‘An hour ago, I took you for—someone else... I don’t know who, I never saw the face, the left arm is across the face and the right arm is waved.... Oh, like this....’ His action was that of an arm gesticulating, with the utmost passion and vehemence. He continued. ‘Last year it started. One moonlight night, I was sittin’ here, when I heard a voice, “Hulloa! Below there!” I jumped up, opened that door, and saw this—Someone standing by the red light near the tunnel, wavin’ just as I showed you. I got hold of me lamp, turned it on red, and ran towards.....It was standin’ just in front of the black mouth o’ the tunnel. I ran right up— I come so close that I wondered at the sleeve still across the eyes—I had me hand out to pull the sleeve away... and it was gone! ... No, not into the tunnel, I ran into the tunnel, and held up my lamp, an’ saw the wet stains creepin’ down the walls.... I ran out again, come in here, an’ telegraphed both ways, “An alarm has been given, is anything wrong?” Back came the answer, both ways. “All well”...’

I explained to him that strange shapes are often known to trouble the delicate nerves of the eye. ‘As to an imaginary cry, listen to the wind, in this unnatural valley! And to the wild harp it makes of the telegraph wires! . . .’

‘That’s all very well, sir, I haven’t finished. Within six hours of what I have described to you..., the accident happened. And through the tunnel, over the spot where I had seen..., what I had seen, they brought the dead. . . . *I have not finished*. That was last year. One morning, five months ago, as the day was breaking, I looked towards the tunnel.... No, it was silent, and did not wave an arm. It was leanin’ against a shaft of light, wi’ both hands covering the face. Like this....’ Once more I followed his action with my eyes. It was an action of mourning. I have seen such an attitude in stone figures on tombs. He dropped his arms, and went on quickly. ‘I come in an’ sat down, feelin’ faint. That very day, as a train come out of the tunnel, I noticed— at the carriage window—hands an’ heads, a han’kerchief flutterin’, I saw it just in time to signal the

driver, he shut off, put his brake on. A woman was brought in here, an' put down on this floor between us. She had been took ill in the train, an' died, here.... Now, sir, mark this, an' judge how my mind is troubled! A week ago, it . . . came back. Ever since, off and on, it has been there.... Aye, at the red light. I 'ave no peace or rest. It goes on calling, for minutes at a time. "Hulloa! Below there! Look out! Look out! Look out! Look OUT!" It stands, waving. It rings that bell –

I caught at that. 'Just now, when twice you went to that door—had your bell rung then? . . . It *had*? ... Now see how your imagination misleads you! My eyes were on that bell, and as I am a living man, it *did not ring* at those times!'

He shook his head. 'I heard it. An' when I went to the door an' looked out . . . *it* was there. Both times.'

The wind and the wires took up the story, with a long lamenting wail. My mouth was very dry, as I said at last, 'Will you come to the door with me now, and look?'

We went together to the door; together we looked into the night. There was the red Danger-light. There was the black mouth of the tunnel. There were the high, wet stones of the cutting. There were the stars. He shook his head, and spoke in a whisper. 'No, it is not there.'

We went in again; he closed the door. 'What does it mean, sir? What is the danger this time? There is danger, up the Line, hangin' over some train that's due *here*: some worse accident.... What can I do?' His voice rose, as his anxiety became uncontrollable. 'If I telegraph "Danger", I can give no reason for it! They would dismiss me....they would think I was mad.'

I saw that for the poor man's sake, as well as for the public safety, what I had to do, was to compose his mind. I explained to him that any man who thoroughly discharged his duty, as he did, must do well; he became calm. At two in the morning, I left him. I had offered to stay the night, but he would not hear of it.

I walked away, along the double line of rails, with a very disagreeable sensation of a train, coming behind me. And I see no reason to conceal that as I ascended the path, I more than once looked back at the Danger-light, and that I should have slept but poorly if my bed had been under it. How ought I to act? . . . I resolved to return to him the next night, offer to accompany him to a wise medical practitioner, and take *his* opinion.

Next evening was a lovely one, and I walked out early to enjoy it. The sun was not yet quite down, when I reached the top of the deep cutting. I would extend my walk for an hour, and it would then be time to climb down to the signal-man's box. Before pursuing my stroll, I stepped to the brink, and looked down....

Close to the red Danger-light—close to the black mouth of the tunnel—there stood a group of men. On the ground in front of the group, a tarpaulin, covering a huddled shape. I descended the path with all the speed I could muster.

'What is the matter?' I called.

One of the group knelt down, and raised an end of the tarpaulin. The face of the dead signal-man was quite composed.

'Run over by a train, Sir... This mornin', broad daylight, we're still waitin' for 'em to come down for the...As the Engine come out o' the tunnel, sir. That young feller drove her. Tom, tell the gentleman.'

His companion stepped forward. 'I was comin' round the curve i' the tunnel, when I seed him at the end. No time to check speed, I blew the whistle—he didn't seem to take heed! We was runnin' right on top of him—I shut off—he turned round, an' stared up at me—we run right on top of 'im.

I looked from him to the dead face. But my natural shock at the sight of Death, was already giving way to a premonition of most unnatural news. And I looked from the dead face, back to the driver of the train.

'But no man in his senses,' said I, 'standing between a double line of rails, with a train bearing down upon him, will stay

rooted to the spot!’

Then I asked him the one question to which I craved the answer; yet it was the answer which I dreaded to hear.

‘What did you do, man,’ said I to the driver of the train—‘what did you do, to make this man lose all power of movement? *What did you do, to kill hzm?*’

He gave the answer; and as he spoke the innocent words,

I felt the slow~touch of a frozen finger down my spine.

‘I done nothin’, sir, I swear it. I just shut off an’ called to him, as loud as I *could* call... Eli?...Oh, I said, “Hulloa, below there—look out!”—I never left off callin’ to Then I ‘ad to cover my eyes, I couldn’t ‘elp it...’

As he spoke, in shuddering retrospect he drew his left sleeve over his face. ‘But, to the last, I tried to wave ‘im away...’ With the other hand, he made the motion he described, and in his attitude I recognized too well the pose which the signal-man had demonstrated to me. ‘But,’ whispered the driver, ‘it was no use...’

Overcome, he hid his face in both hands. It was an action of mourning. I have seen such an attitude in stone figures on tombs.