

The Signalman

A strange meeting

‘Hello! You down there!’
The signalman was standing at the door of his box, directly below me. I was sure he could hear my voice but he did not look up. Instead, he looked in the opposite direction down the railway line.

There was something strange about the way he did this, something I could not explain. I looked again, using my hands to protect my eyes from the bright sunset.

‘Hello! I am up here!’

This time he turned around and looked up to where I was standing, high above him.

‘Is there a path? I want to come down and speak to you.’

Down in the Cutting

He did not answer. Just then, a train came past, forcing me to move back. When I looked again he was refolding the flag he was carrying.

I repeated my question. He looked at me for some moments, without speaking. Then he pointed with his flag towards a point in the distance. I walked over to that point and looked closely around me. There was a very rough path, and I followed it.

The cutting was deep and unusually steep. It took me a few minutes to climb down low enough to see the signalman again. He was standing between the rails, waiting for me to appear. He had his left hand at his chin, and his right elbow rested on his right hand.

A dark and lonely place

I walked down on to the level of the railway. As I came nearer, I saw that he had a dark beard, heavy eyebrows and bad skin. His signal box was in a dark and lonely place.

On either side, there were high wet walls, shutting out almost all natural light. In one direction the line seemed to stretch without end. In the other there was a gloomy red light at the entry to a dark tunnel. Very little sunlight ever reached this place.

It had a strange, dead smell. I felt its cold wind in my bones. I felt I had left the natural world.

The signalman watched me come towards him. When I was near enough to touch him, he took a step back and lifted his hand.

‘This is a very lonely place,’ I said. ‘I don’t expect you have many visitors.’

He did not answer. Instead, he looked in a very strange way at the red light at the tunnel’s mouth.

I looked at his staring eyes and gloomy face. A terrible thought came into my mind. Perhaps this was a ghost, not a man! Then I noticed the fear in his eyes.

‘Why are you looking at me in that way?’ I asked, forcing a smile,

He answered in a low voice: ‘I thought I had seen you before.’

Very lonely

‘Where did you see me?’

The signalman pointed to the red light.

‘There?’

Staring at me, he replied (but without sound), ‘Yes.’

‘My good fellow,’ I said. I promise you I have never been here before.’

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘I can see that now.’

We both relaxed a little. ‘Do you have much work to do here?’ I asked.

‘Not physical work,’ he said. ‘I only have to change that signal, and look after that light.’

‘But you have to spend many hours watching the line,’ I said. ‘It must be very lonely.’

‘I am used to it, sir,’ he said. ‘And I try to spend my time well. I read and study.’

‘Do you always have to stay down here? Don’t you ever go up into the sunshine?’

‘Not very often, sir’ he said. ‘I must always stay near the line.’

He took me into his box where there was a fire, and a desk for an official book. There was also a machine with a little electric bell for sending telegraphs along the line.

The bell interrupted the signalman several times. When it rang he had to read off messages, and send replies. Once he had to stand outside the door, and show a flag as a train passed.

Though the signalman obviously knew his work very well, his behaviour was a little strange. Once he turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring.

Getting to his feet, he opened the door of the hut and looked out towards the red light near the mouth of the tunnel. When he returned to the fire he had that strange look again.

I am troubled

‘Are you happy with your work?’ I asked

‘I used to be happy,’ he answered, in that same low voice ‘But now I am troubled, sir.’

‘By what? What is your trouble?’

‘It is very difficult to explain, sir. And very, very difficult to talk about. If you visit me again tomorrow night, I will try to tell you.’

‘When shall I come?’

‘I go off early in the morning. I shall be here again at ten o’clock tomorrow night, sir.’

We went out through the door together. ‘I’ll show you my white light, sir,’ he said, in his strange low voice, ‘until you have found the way up. Only don’t call out when you reach the top. Nor when you come down tomorrow night. You must promise me that!’

This made me a little nervous, but I said, ‘Very well’.

‘Before you go, can I ask you a question?’

‘Certainly.’

‘What made you cry, “Hello! You down there!” Why those exact words?’

Someone else

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I suppose I said them because I saw you below.’

‘No other reason?’

‘No.’

He wished me good night and held up his light. I walked by the side of the railway line until I found the path. It was easier to climb up than to come down, and I got back to my hotel without adventure.

The next night I kept my appointment. The clocks in the distance were striking eleven when I began climbing down the path. The signalman was waiting for me at the bottom.

‘I have not called out,’ I said, when we came close together. ‘May I speak now?’

‘Of course, sir.’

We shook hands and walked together to the box. Then we entered it, closed the door, and sat down by the fire.

I will try to explain

‘I have decided, sir,’ he began, as we sat down. “That I will try to explain to you what troubles me.’

He spoke in little more than a whisper. I had to lean forward to hear him.

‘I thought you were someone else yesterday evening,’ he continued.

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Someone like me?’

‘I don’t know. I never saw the face.’

‘I’m sorry I don’t understand.’

What did he say?

‘One moonlight night,’ said the signalman, ‘I was sitting here. Suddenly I heard a voice cry, “Hello! You down there!” I jumped up and looked out from that door.’

‘What did you see?’

‘A man was standing by the red light near the tunnel. His left arm was across his face but he was waving his right arm. This way.’ He made a gesture with his own left arm to show me.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Exactly what you said. “Look out!” the man was calling. “Hello! You down there! Look out!”’

‘What did you do?’

‘I picked up my lamp, and ran towards him. “What’s wrong?” I called. “What has happened? Where?”’

The man stood just outside the tunnel. I ran right up to him, but he still kept his sleeve across his eyes. My hand stretched out to pull the sleeve away. But he had gone.’

‘Is anything wrong?’

‘Into the tunnel?’ I said.

‘No. I ran on into the tunnel. After about five hundred yards I stopped and held my lamp above my head. All I saw was the dark, wet walls. I ran out again, faster than I had come in.

‘Outside the tunnel, I looked around the red light with my own light. Then I ran back to this box and telegraphed both ways along the line. “An alarm has been given. Is anything wrong?” The answer came back, both ways, “All well.”’

This strange tale produced cold sweat on my neck. But I tried to give comfort to the signalman.

‘This was not a man you saw,’ I said. ‘It was your eyes playing tricks with the light. And I can explain the cry you heard. Listen to the strange sound the wind makes with the telegraph wires in this unnatural place. Isn’t a human cry?’

We sat listening for a while.

The signalman shook his head. ‘I know the cry of the wind on wires very well,’ he said. ‘I often spend winter nights alone here. But I have not finished my story.’

‘I am sorry. Please continue.’

Touching my arm, he said slowly. ‘Six hours after I saw the figure, there was a terrible accident on this line. They carried the dead and the wounded through the tunnel, sir. They brought them to the very spot where the man had stood.’

A remarkable coincidence

There was a long pause. Outside the wind made a crying sound in the wires.

‘That is a remarkable coincidence,’ I said. ‘But such coincidences happen often in life.’

‘This happened a year ago,’ he said, again laying his hand upon my arm. ‘And a week ago the spirit returned.’

‘Where? At the light?’

‘Yes. At the Danger-light. It appears at different times.’

‘What does it do?’

He repeated the action with his arm. Again the message was clear to me. It said, ‘Clear the way!’

Then he went on. ‘I have no peace or rest because of it. I hear it calling to me, “You down there! Look out!” I see it standing there waving to me. It rings my little bell -’

‘Did it ring your bell yesterday evening when I was here?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I promise you it did NOT ring at the time you went to the door.’

A Strange Vibration

He shook his head. ‘I have never made a mistake about that yet, sir. I have never confused the spirit’s ring with that from the station. The spirit’s ring is a strange vibration in the bell. I am not surprised that you did not hear

it. But I heard it.'

'And did the spirit seem to be there, when you looked out?'

'It WAS there.'

What does the spirit mean?

'Will you come to the door with me?' I asked. 'We will look for it now.'

He bit his lower lip, but got up from his chair. I opened the door, and stood on the step. He stood in the doorway.

Along the line there was the Danger-light. There was the gloomy mouth of the tunnel. There were the high, wet stone walls of the cutting. There were the stars above them.

'Do you see it?' I asked him, watching his face carefully.

'No,' he answered. 'It is not there.'

We went in again, shut the door, and returned to our seats.

He stared at the fire, only occasionally turning his eyes to me.

'What does the ghost mean?' he said. 'What is it warning against? There is danger coming somewhere on the line. But what is the danger? Where is the danger? Something terrible will happen. But what can I do?'

'I am only a poor signalman!'

He pulled out his handkerchief, and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

'I could telegraph 'Danger' along the line,' he went on, wiping the palms of his hands. 'But I can give no reason for it. They would think I was mad.'

He put his hands across his forehead. His distress was terrible to see.

'When the spirit first stood under the Danger-light,' he went on, putting his dark hair back from his head, 'why did it not tell me where the accident was to happen? Does it now want to prepare me for a second disaster? But I am only poor signalman on this lonely station! Why not go to somebody with the power to do something?'

I saw that for the poor man's sake, as well as for public safety, I had to try and calm him. 'You are a good signalman,' I told him 'The most important thing is for you to do your job well.'

'You are right, sir,' he answered, and as the night advanced his attention turned to his various duties. I offered to stay until the morning, but he assured me there was no need.

‘Not the man belonging to that box?’

I was worried about the signalman and looked back more than once at the red light as I climbed back up the path. Was it safe to leave the lives of passengers in his hands? I decided to talk to him again the following night. Perhaps I could persuade him to see a doctor?

The next evening was lovely and I set out early. The sun was not quite down when I crossed the field near the top of the cutting. Reaching the exact spot where I had first seen the signalman I realised that it was too early to go down to his box. I was about to turn and walk some more when, without thinking, I looked down towards the line. What I saw froze my blood.

Close to the mouth of the tunnel, there was a man. His left arm covered his face and that he was waving his right arm.

Then I saw that it was a real man. He was making his gesture to a little group of other men standing at a distance. The Danger-light was not yet lit.

I immediately knew that something was wrong and ran down the path as fast as I could. Why had I left the man there? Why had I not told anyone?

‘What is the matter?’ I asked the men.

‘Look out! Look out!’

‘A signalman was killed this morning, sir.’

‘Not the man belonging to that box?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Oh no! How did it happen?’ I asked, turning from one to another.

‘He was knocked down by a train, sir. No man in England knew his work better but for some reason he was still on the line as the engine came out of the tunnel. ‘

‘The driver here was showing us how it happened. Show the gentleman, Tom.’

A man, dressed in rough dark clothes, stepped back to the mouth of the tunnel.

‘The train was coming round the curve in the tunnel, sir,’ he said. ‘I saw him at the end with his light in his hand but there was no time to slow down. The strange thing is he seemed not to hear the whistle.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I called out to him, “You down there! Look out! Look out!”

It was terrible, sir. I never stopped calling to him. I put my left arm before my eyes not to see. But I carried on waving my right arm until the end.'

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Glossary

coincidence - (here) by chance or accident
cutting - where the ground has been cut for a railway or road
gloomy - dark, without light
interrupt - stop someone talking or doing something
sleeve - the arm of shirt or jacket .
sprit - ghost
troubled - worried, anxious

Activities

How many of these words do you understand?

Fill each gap with a word from the list below.

At the beginning of the story the narrator is standing above a railway (1) ----- . He looks down and sees a (2) - ----- standing on the line. Further along there is a (3) ----- red light at the mouth of a (4) ----- . The signalman is carrying a (5) ---- in his hand. He tells the narrator about a (6) ----- that appears at the (7) ----- of the tunnel. The spirit holds his (8) ----- in front of his face.

gloomy mouth sleeve signalman flag tunnel cutting spirit
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scussion

What other ghost stories do you know? Do you believe in ghosts?

Imagine you are the narrator. Write your diary for the day you met the signalman.

What do you remember about the story? Try this quiz

Answers

Part 1 - 1) c 2) a 3) b 4) b

Part 2 - 1) c 2) b 3) c

New words 1) cutting 2) standing 3) gloomy 4) tunnel 5) flag 6) spirit 7) mouth 8) hand

About The Signalman

Charles Dickens loved ghost stories and wrote perhaps the most famous ghost story ever: 'A Christmas Carol' (1843).

The inspiration for the story was one of the most terrifying experiences of his life. In June 1865 Dickens was on a train that crashed, killing ten people.

The cause of the crash was a mistake made by men working on the line. They lifted the track, not expecting a train for several hours. The driver received no warning and the train derailed. In the story the signalman does manage to warn the driver because he has been visited by a ghost.

Dickens wrote about some of the first popular railways in the world. He loved this new form of transport but it was very dangerous at this time. He was a nervous traveller for the rest of his life

The Signalman first appeared in the Christmas edition of a magazine called 'All The Year Round' in 1866.