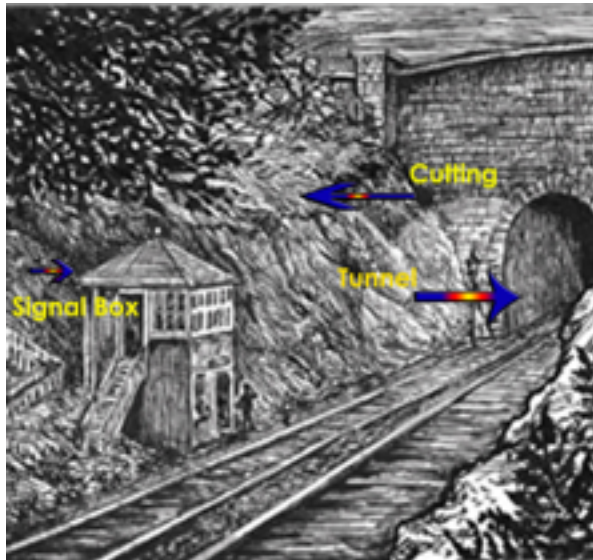


The Signalman

Charles Dickens

Retold by Kieran McGovern

Glossary7



‘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. He looked up to where I was standing, high above him.

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

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 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. This was 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 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 the same low voice ‘But now I am troubled, sir.’

‘By what? What is your trouble?’

‘It is very difficult to explain, sir. 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?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I suppose I it was 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 have decided, sir,’ he began, as we sat down.
‘That I will try to explain to you what troubles me.’

End of Part One

What do you think ‘troubles’ the signalman? Find out in Part 2

Glossary

cutting - ground cut for a railway or road

gloomy - dark, depressing, unlit

interrupt - stop someone doing something (e.g. talking)

spirit - ghost

stared/staring (v) - look at with intensity

startled – sudden shock, extremely surprised

telegraph - way of sending messages

troubled - worried, anxious
