

Previously in *The Signalman* - Part 2

Something is troubling a signalman working on a railway line in a gloomy cutting. Finally, he tells his strange tale to our narrator.

I will try to explain

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.'

'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.'

'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?’

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.’

The spirit returned

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 Danger-light?’

‘Yes. 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.’

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.’

‘Why did it not tell me?’

‘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 at the gloomy mouth of the tunnel. On either side of the line were the high, wet stonewalls of the cutting. Stars filled the night sky above us.

'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?'

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.

Distress

'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.

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?

Something was wrong

The next evening was lovely and I set out early. The sun was not quite down when I reached the exact spot where I had first seen the signalman. It was too early to go down to his box and I was about to turn and walk some more.

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.

‘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.

‘Look out! Look out!’

‘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.’

The End

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Links to Part One and the complete original story [here](#):

Charles Dickens wrote this story a year after he personally experienced a major train disaster - the story of what happened [here](#)

Glossary (2)

carriage - vehicle pulled by a horse

coincidence - (here) by chance or accident

conscience - a sense of right and wrong

corpse - dead body

cutting - ground cut for a railway or road

gloomy - dark, depressing, unlit

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

sleeve - the arm of shirt or jacket

snatch/snatcher - to take quickly, to steal or rob

sober – not drunk, serious.

spirit - ghost

stared/staring (v) - look at something/someone with intensity

startled – sudden shock, extremely surprised
