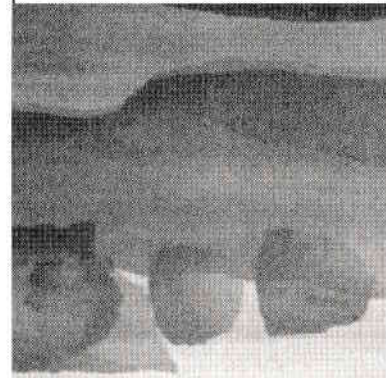


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Short Stories



Dickens, Stevenson et al.

Introduction, notes and activities by

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Selection, introduction, notes and activities

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Charles Dickens (1812-70)

Known above all for his many novels, some of which – such as *Oliver Twist* and *Little Dorrit* – were inspired in part by his own experiences in childhood, Charles Dickens was immensely popular in both Great Britain and the United States during his lifetime. His boisterous humour, often expressed in the form of broadly comic characterisation, contrasts with the seriousness of his social comment: his attacks on the dehumanising effects of industrialisation are justly famous. But he shared with many of his fellow-Victorians a taste for the sentimental and the sensational, now regarded as defects in his work; modern readers are particularly uncomfortable with his representation of dying children and of women, who for Dickens were either angelic or grotesque. His early short stories, of which *The Signalman* is an example, often deal with the supernatural.

Pre-reading Activity

Do you believe in supernatural phenomena? Have you ever had a premonition which was later confirmed?

Activities while Reading

Section I: from the beginning to 'there was something in the man that daunted me' (p. 11)

Words

Find at least five words in this section which suggest an unpleasant atmosphere.

Interpretation

Can you suggest a possible reason for the signalman's 'singular air of reluctance or compulsion' when he points out the path to the narrator?

Description

What physical details about the signalman's post strike the narrator? What comparison does he use to reinforce the atmosphere?

Section II: from 'He directed...' (p. 11) to 'far asunder' (p. 14)

Interpretation

1. What does the narrator mean when he says of the signalman: 'I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind' (p. 11)? Why does he say this?

2. Why do you think the signalman 'turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring' (p. 13)?

Structure and style

The paragraph beginning 'His manner cleared' (p. 11) gives an account in indirect speech of a conversation between the two men.

- a. Rewrite it in direct speech.
b. Why, in your opinion, did Dickens choose the indirect form here?

Words

1. Suggest meanings for the following words and phrases, then check your answers in your monolingual dictionary or with your teacher.
- a. intently watchful of me (p. 11)
 - b. a poor hand at figures (p. 12)
 - c. the same held good (p. 12)
 - d. he had run wild (p. 13)
 - e. in that capacity (p. 13)
2. Which of the following adjectives describe the signalman's character? Choose one or more.

ambitious	apprehensive	carefree	
conscientious	friendly	good-natured	industrious
lazy	studious	talkative	

Section III: from 'Said I, when I rose' (p. 14) to 'long lamenting wail' (p. 19)

Style

What phrase, used three times by the signalman, suggests that he is alarmed by voices in the dark?

Interpretation

1. Explain in your own words 'the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine' (p. 16). What emotion does it represent? Why does the narrator feel that emotion at that moment?
2. How does the narrator try to rationalise the imaginary cry?
3. At this point in the story, do you find the signalman's account of the ghost convincing? Why?/Why not?


Section IV: from 'He resumed. "Now, sir, mark this"' (p. 19) to the end

Interpretation

1. Suggest why the narrator does not hear the bell ring when the signalman does.
2. What do you think the ghost's warning to the signalman concerns this time?
3. What is the narrator's attitude to the signalman at this point?
4. Why does the narrator emphasise the coincidence mentioned in the last paragraph?

Words

1. Suggest meanings for the following words and phrases, then check your answers in your monolingual dictionary or with your teacher.
 - a. by fits and starts (p. 19)
 - b. displace (p. 21)
 - c. somebody with credit to be believed (p. 21)
 - d. he would not hear of it (p. 22)
2. Explain 'this appearance of a man was a man indeed' (p. 23).
3. What is the 'little low hut' (p. 23)?

 **H**alloa! Below there!" When he heard a voice thus calling to him, he was standing at the door of his box, with a flag in his hand, furled round its short pole. One would have thought, considering the nature of the ground, that he could not have doubted from what quarter the voice came; but instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting¹ nearly over his head, he turned himself about, and looked down the Line. There was something remarkable in his manner of doing so, though I could not have said for my life what. But I know it was remarkable enough to attract my notice, even though his figure was foreshortened and shadowed, down in the deep trench,² and mine was high above him, so steeped in the glow of an angry sunset, that I had shaded my eyes with my hand before I saw him at all.

"Halloa! Below!"

From looking down the Line, he turned himself about again,

1. *cutting* : open excavation through raised ground to permit a railway to cross it.
2. *trench* : long narrow hole cut in the ground.

and, raising his eyes, saw my figure high above him.

"Is there any path by which I can come down and speak to you?"

He looked up at me without replying, and I looked down at him without pressing him too soon with a repetition of my idle question. Just then there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation, and 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 from this rapid train had passed me, and was skimming away over the landscape, I looked down again, and saw him refurling the flag he had shown while the train went by.

I repeated my inquiry. After a pause, during which he seemed to regard me with fixed attention, he motioned with his rolled-up flag towards a point on my level, some two or three hundred yards distant. I called down to him, "All right!" and made for that point. There, by dint of¹ looking closely about me, I found a rough zigzag descending path notched out,² which I followed.

The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate. It was made through a clammy³ stone, that became oozier⁴ and wetter as I went down. For these reasons, I found the way long enough to give me time to recall a singular air of reluctance or compulsion with which he had pointed out the path.

When I came down low enough upon the zigzag descent to see him again, I saw that he was standing between the rails on the way by which the train had lately passed, in an attitude as if he were waiting for me to appear. He had his left hand at his

1. *by dint of* : by means of.
2. *notched out* : marked with v-shaped cuts.
3. *clammy* : unpleasantly wet and cold.
4. *oozier* [u:ziə] : comparative of oozy: covered in thick liquid mud.

chin, and that left elbow rested on his right hand, crossed over his breast. His attitude was one of such expectation and watchfulness that I stopped a moment, wondering at it.

I resumed my downward way, and stepping out upon the level of the railroad, and drawing nearer to him, saw that he was a dark sallow¹ man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows. His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged² stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way only a crooked³ prolongation of this great dungeon; the shorter perspective in the other direction terminating in a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding⁴ air. So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it 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.

Before he stirred, I was near enough to him to have touched him. Not even then removing his eyes from mine, he stepped back one step, and lifted his hand.

This was a lonesome post to occupy (I said), and it had riveted⁵ my attention when I looked down from up yonder. A visitor was a rarity, I should suppose; not an unwelcome rarity, I hoped? In me, he merely saw a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life, and who, being at last set free, had a newly-awakened interest in these great works. To such purpose I spoke to him; but I am far from sure of the terms I

1. *sallow* : (of skin) yellowish-brown.
2. *jagged* : rough and uneven, with sharp points.
3. *crooked* : not straight.
4. *forbidding* : looking dangerous.
5. *riveted* : fixed firmly.

used; for, besides that I am not happy in opening any conversation, there was something in the man that daunted¹ me.

He directed a most curious look towards the red light near the tunnel's mouth, and looked all about it, as if something were missing from it, and then looked at me.

That light was part of his charge? Was it not?

He answered in a low voice, —“Don't you know it is?”

The monstrous thought came into my mind, as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face, that this was a spirit, not a man. I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind.

In my turn, I stepped back. But in making the action, I detected in his eyes some latent fear of me. This put the monstrous thought to flight.

“You look at me,” I said, forcing a smile, “as if you had a dread of me.”

“I was doubtful,” he returned, “whether I had seen you before.”

“Where?”

He pointed to the red light he had looked at.

“There?” I said.

Intently watchful of me, he replied (but without sound), “Yes.”

“My good fellow, what should I do there? However, be that as it may, I never was there, you may swear.”

“I think I may,” he rejoined. “Yes; I am sure I may.”

His manner cleared, like my own. He replied to my remarks with readiness, and in well-chosen words. Had he much to do there? Yes; that was to say, he had enough responsibility to bear; but exactness and watchfulness were what was required of him, and of actual work—manual labour—he had next to none. To

1. *daunted* [dɔːntɪd] : discouraged.

change that signal, to trim those lights,¹ and to turn this iron handle now and then, was all he had to do under that head. Regarding those many long and lonely hours of which I seemed to make so much, he could only say that the routine of his life had shaped itself into that form, and he had grown used to it. He had taught himself a language down here, —if only to know it by sight, and to have formed his own crude ideas of its pronunciation, could be called learning it. He had also worked at fractions and decimals, and tried a little algebra; but he was, and had been as a boy, a poor hand at figures. Was it necessary for him when on duty always to remain in that channel of damp air, and could he never rise into the sunshine from between those high stone walls? Why, that depended upon times and circumstances. Under some conditions there would be less upon the Line than under others, and the same held good as to certain hours of the day and night. In bright weather, he did choose occasions for getting a little above these lower shadows; but, being at all times liable to be called by his electric bell, and at such times listening for it with redoubled anxiety, the relief was less than I would suppose.

He took me into his box, where there was a fire, a desk for an official book in which he had to make certain entries, a telegraphic instrument with its dial, face, and needles, and the little bell of which he had spoken. On my trusting that he would excuse the remark that he had been well educated, and (I hoped I might say without offence) perhaps educated above that station, he observed that instances of slight incongruity in such wise² would rarely be found wanting among large bodies of

1. *trim those lights* : clean and cut the wick of oil lamps.
2. *in such wise* : (arch.) of a similar kind.

men; that he had heard it was so in workhouses,³ in the police force, even in that last desperate resource, the army; and that he knew it was so, more or less, in any great railway staff. He had been, when young (if I could believe it, sitting in that hut,—he scarcely could), a student of natural philosophy,² and had attended lectures; but he had run wild, misused his opportunities, gone down, and never risen again. He had no complaint to offer about that. He had made his bed, and he lay upon it. It was far too late to make another.

All that I have here condensed he said in a quiet manner, with his grave dark regards divided between me and the fire. He threw in the word, "Sir," from time to time, and especially when he referred to his youth,—as though to request me to understand that he claimed to be nothing but what I found him. He was several times interrupted by the little bell, and had to read off messages, and send replies. Once he had to stand without the door,³ and display a flag as a train passed, and make some verbal communication to the driver. In the discharge of his duties, I observed him to be remarkably exact and vigilant, breaking off his discourse at a syllable, and remaining silent until what he had to do was done.

In a word, I should have set this man down as one of the safest of men to be employed in that capacity, but for the circumstance that while he was speaking to me he twice broke off with a fallen colour, turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring, opened the door of the hut (which was kept shut to exclude the unhealthy damp), and looked out towards the red light near the mouth of the tunnel. On both of

1. *workhouses* : in earlier times, places for poor people to live if they had no work.
2. *natural philosophy* : old name for physics.
3. *without the door* : (arch.) outside the door.

those occasions, he came back to the fire with the inexplicable air upon him which I had remarked, without being able to define, when we were so far asunder.

Said I, when I rose to leave him, "You almost make me think that I have met with a contented man."

(I am afraid I must acknowledge that I said it to lead him on.)

"I believe I used to be so," he rejoined, in the low voice in which he had first spoken; "but I am troubled, sir, I am troubled."

He would have recalled the words if he could. He had said them, however, and I took them up quickly.

"With what? What is your trouble?"

"It is very difficult to impart, sir. It is very, very difficult to speak of. If ever you make me another visit, I will try to tell you."

"But I expressly intend to make you another visit. Say, when shall it be?"

"I go off early in the morning, and I shall be on again at ten to-morrow night, sir."

"I will come at eleven."

He thanked me, and went out at the door with me. "I'll show my white light, sir," he said, in his peculiar low voice, "till you have found the way up. When you have found it, don't call out! And when you are at the top, don't call out!"

His manner seemed to make the place strike colder to me, but I said no more than, "Very well."

"And when you come down to-morrow night, don't call out! Let me ask you a parting question. What made you cry, 'Halloa! Below there!' to-night?"

"Heaven knows," said I. "I cried something to that effect—"

"Not to that effect, sir. Those were the very words. I know them well."

"Admit those were the very words. I said them, no doubt, because I saw you below."

"For no other reason?"

"What other reason could I possibly have?"

"You had no feeling that they were conveyed to you in any supernatural way?"

"No."

He wished me good-night, and held up his light. I walked by the side of the down Line¹ of rails (with a very disagreeable sensation of a train coming behind me) until I found the path. It was easier to mount than to descend, and I got back to my inn without any adventure.

Punctual to my appointment, I placed my foot on the first notch of the zigzag next night, as the distant clocks were striking eleven. He was waiting for me at the bottom, with his white light on. "I have not called out," I said, when we came close together; "may I speak now?" "By all means, sir." "Good-night, then, and here's my hand." "Good-night, sir, and here's mine." With that we walked side by side to his box, entered it, closed the door, and sat down by the fire.

"I have made up my mind, sir," he began, bending forward as soon as we were seated, and speaking in a tone but a little above a whisper, "that you shall not have to ask me twice what troubles me. I took you for some one else yesterday evening. That troubles me."

"That mistake?"

"No. That some one else."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"Like me?"

"I don't know. I never saw the face. The left arm is across the face, and the right arm is waved,—violently waved. This way."

1. *down Line* : railway line carrying trains away from the main station.