

The Signalman

by Charles Dickens

Read by Ross Armstrong for DailyStep English
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"HALLOA! Below there!" ^[1]



HALLOA! Below there!

When he heard a voice thus calling to him, he was standing at the door of his box^[2], with a flag in his hand, furled round its short pole^[3]. One would have thought, considering the nature of the ground^[4], that he could not have doubted from what quarter the voice came^[5]; but instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting^[6] nearly over his head, he turned himself about^[7], and looked down the Line^[8]. There was something remarkable in his manner of doing so, though I could not have said for my life what^[9]. But I know it was remarkable enough to attract my notice^[10],

even though his figure was foreshortened and shadowed^[11], down in the deep trench, and mine was high above him, so steeped in the glow of an angry sunset^[12], that I had shaded my eyes with my hand^[13] before I saw him at all.

"Halloa! Below!"

From looking down the Line, he turned himself about again, 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^[14]. Just then there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation^[15], and an oncoming rush that caused me to start back^[16], as though it had force to draw me down^[17]. When such vapour as rose to my height^[18] from this rapid train had passed me, and was skimming away over the landscape^[19], I looked down again, and saw him refurling the flag he had shown while the train went by^[20].

I repeated my inquiry. After a pause, during which he seemed to regard me with fixed attention^[21], 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 of looking closely about me^[22], I found a rough zigzag descending path notched out^[23], which I followed.

The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate^[24]. It was made through a clammy stone, that became oozy and wetter as I went down^[25]. For these reasons, I found the way long enough to give me time to recall a singular air of reluctance or compulsion^[26] 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^[27], in an attitude as if he were waiting for me to appear. He had his left hand at his chin^[28], and that left elbow rested on his right hand, crossed over his breast^[29]. His attitude was one of such expectation and watchfulness that I stopped a moment, wondering at it^[30].

I resumed my downward way, and stepping out upon the level of the railroad^[31], and drawing nearer to him^[32], saw that he was a dark, sallow man^[33], with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows. His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw^[34]. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky^[35]; the perspective one way^[36] only a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon^[37]; 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 forbidding air^[38]. So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy, deadly smell^[39]; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world^[40].



The gloomier entrance to a black tunnel

Before he stirred, I was near enough to him to have touched him^[41]. Not even then removing his eyes from mine^[42], he stepped back one step, and lifted his hand.

This was a lonesome post to occupy (I said), and it had riveted my attention when I looked down from up yonder^[43]. A visitor was a rarity, I should suppose; not an unwelcome rarity, I hoped^[44]? In me, he merely saw a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life^[45], and who, being at last set free, had a newly-awakened interest in these great works^[46].

To such purpose I spoke to him^[47]; but I am far from sure of the terms I used; for, besides that I am not happy in opening any conversation, there was something in the man that daunted me^[48].

He directed a most curious look towards the red light near the tunnel’s mouth^[49], and looked all about it, as if something were missing from it^[50], 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^[51], that this was a spirit, not a man^[52]. I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind^[53].

In my turn, I stepped back. But in making the action, I detected in his eyes some latent fear of me^[54]. This put the monstrous thought to flight^[55].

“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^[56], 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.^[57]”

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

His manner cleared, like my own^[58]. 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^[59]; but exactness and watchfulness were what was required of him, and of actual work—manual labour—he had next to none. To change that signal, to trim those lights, 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^[60], 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^[61].

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^[62], 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^[63]; but, being at all times liable to be called by his electric bell^[64], 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^[65], a telegraphic instrument^[66] 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^[67], and (I hoped I might say without offence) perhaps educated above that station^[68], he observed that instances of slight incongruity in such wise^[69] would rarely be found wanting among large bodies of men^[70]; that he had heard it was so in workhouses, in the police force, even in that last desperate resource^[71], 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^[72], and had attended lectures; but he had run wild, misused his opportunities, gone down, and never risen again^[73]. 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^[74].

All that I have here condensed^[75] he said in a quiet manner, with his grave, dark regards divided between me and the fire^[76]. 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^[77]. 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^[78], and display a flag as a train passed, and make some verbal communication to the driver. In the discharge of his duties^[79], I observed him to be remarkably exact and vigilant, breaking off his discourse at a syllable^[80], 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^[81], but for the circumstance that while he was speaking to me he twice broke off with a fallen colour^[82], 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 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^[83].

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^[84].)

"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^[85]. 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^[86]. 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



He wished me good-night

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^[87], 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—"^[88]

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

"Admit those were the very words^[89]. 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?"^[90]

"No."

He wished me good-night, and held up his light. I walked by the side of the down Line of rails^[91] (with a very disagreeable sensation of a train coming behind me) until I found the path. It was easier to mount than to descend^[92], and I got back to my inn without any adventure^[93].

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^[94].”

“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^[95]. 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.”

I followed his action with my eyes, and it was the action of an arm gesticulating, with the utmost passion and vehemence, “For God’s sake, clear the way!”

“One moonlight night,” said the man, “I was sitting here, when I heard a voice cry, ‘Halloa! Below there!’ I started up^[96], looked from that door, and saw this someone else standing by the red light near the tunnel, waving as I just now showed you. The voice seemed hoarse with shouting, and it cried, ‘Look out! Look out!’ And then again, ‘Halloa! Below there! Look out!’ I caught up my lamp, turned it on red, and ran towards the figure^[97], calling, ‘What’s wrong? What has happened? Where?’ It stood just outside the blackness of the tunnel. I advanced so close upon it that I wondered at its keeping the sleeve across its eyes^[98]. I ran right up at it, and had my hand stretched out to pull the sleeve away, when it was gone^[99].”

“Into the tunnel?” said I.

“No. I ran on into the tunnel, five hundred yards^[100]. I stopped, and held my lamp above my head, and saw the figures of the measured distance^[101], and saw the wet stains stealing down the walls and trickling through the arch^[102]. I ran out again faster than I had run in (for I had a mortal abhorrence of the place upon me^[103]), and I looked all round the red light with my own red light, and I went up the iron ladder to the gallery atop of it^[104], and I came down again,

and ran back here. I telegraphed both ways, 'An alarm has been given. Is anything wrong?' The answer came back, both ways, 'All well.' "

Resisting the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine^[105], I showed him how that this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight^[106]; and how that figures, originating in disease of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye^[107], were known to have often troubled patients, some of whom had become conscious of the nature of their affliction^[108], and had even proved it by experiments upon themselves. "As to an imaginary cry," said I, "do but listen for a moment to the wind in this unnatural valley^[109] while we speak so low, and to the wild harp it makes of the telegraph wires^[110]."

That was all very well, he returned, after we had sat listening for a while, and he ought to know something of the wind and the wires,—he who so often passed long winter nights there, alone and watching. But he would beg to remark that he had not finished^[111]. I asked his pardon, and he slowly added these words, touching my arm,—

"Within six hours after the Appearance, the memorable accident on this Line happened^[112], and within ten hours the dead and wounded were brought along through the tunnel over the spot where the figure had stood."

A disagreeable shudder crept over me, but I did my best against it^[113]. It was not to be denied, I rejoined^[114], that this was a remarkable coincidence, calculated deeply to impress his mind^[115]. But it was unquestionable that remarkable coincidences did continually occur, and they must be taken into account in dealing with such a subject. Though to be sure I must admit, I added (for I thought I saw that he was going to bring the objection to bear upon me^[116]), men of common sense did not allow much for coincidences in making the ordinary calculations of life^[117].

He again begged to remark that he had not finished.

I again begged his pardon for being betrayed into interruptions.

"This," he said, again laying his hand upon my arm, and glancing over his shoulder with hollow eyes, "was just a year ago. Six or seven months passed, and I had recovered from the surprise and shock, when one morning, as the day was breaking, I, standing at the door, looked towards the red light, and saw the spectre again." He stopped, with a fixed look at me.

"Did it cry out?"

"No. It was silent."

"Did it wave its arm?"

"No. It leaned against the shaft of the light, with both hands before the face^[118]. 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^[119].

"Did you go up to it?"

"I came in and sat down, partly to collect my thoughts, partly because it had turned me faint. When I went to the door again, daylight was above me, and the ghost was gone." "But nothing followed? Nothing came of this?"^[120] He touched me on the arm with his forefinger twice or thrice giving a ghastly nod each time:—

"That very day, as a train came out of the tunnel, I noticed, at a carriage window on my side, what looked like a confusion of hands and heads, and something waved. I saw it just in time to signal the driver, Stop! He shut off, and put his brake on, but the train drifted past here a hundred and fifty yards or more^[121]. I ran after it, and, as I went along, heard terrible screams and cries. A beautiful young lady had died instantaneously in one of the compartments, and was brought in here, and laid down on this floor between us."

Involuntarily I pushed my chair back, as I looked from the boards at which he pointed to himself.

"True, sir. True. Precisely as it happened, so I tell it you."

I could think of nothing to say, to any purpose^[122], and my mouth was very dry. The wind and the wires took up the story with a long lamenting wail^[123].

He resumed. "Now, sir, mark this, and judge how my mind is troubled^[124]. The spectre came back a week ago. Ever since, it has been there, now and again, by fits and starts."^[125]

"At the light?"

"At the Danger-light."

"What does it seem to do?"

He repeated, if possible with increased passion and vehemence, that former gesticulation of, "For God's sake, clear the way!"^[126]

Then he went on. "I have no peace or rest for it. It calls to me, for many minutes together, in an agonised manner, 'Below there! Look out! Look out!' It stands waving to me. It rings my little bell—"



For God's sake, clear the way!

I caught at that. “Did it ring your bell yesterday evening when I was here, and you went to the door?”

“Twice.”

“Why, see,” said I, “how your imagination misleads you.^[127] My eyes were on the bell, and my ears were open to the bell, and if I am a living man, it did NOT ring at those times^[128]. No, nor at any other time, except when it was rung in the natural course of physical things by the station communicating with you.”

He shook his head. “I have never made a mistake as to that yet, sir. I have never confused the spectre’s ring with the man’s. The ghost’s ring is a strange vibration in the bell that it derives from nothing else^[129], and I have not asserted that the bell stirs to the eye^[130]. I don’t wonder that you failed to hear it. But I heard it.”

“And did the spectre seem to be there, when you looked out?”

“It WAS there.”

“Both times?”

He repeated firmly: “Both times.”

“Will you come to the door with me, and look for it now?” He bit his under lip as though he were somewhat unwilling, but arose. I opened the door, and stood on the step, while he stood in the doorway. There was the Danger-light. There was the dismal 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, taking particular note of his face^[131]. His eyes were prominent and strained^[132], but not very much more so, perhaps, than my own had been when I had directed them earnestly towards the same spot.

“No,” he answered. “It is not there.”

“Agreed,” said I.

We went in again, shut the door, and resumed our seats^[133]. I was thinking how best to improve this advantage^[134], if it might be called one, when he took up the conversation in such a matter-of-course way, so assuming that there could be no serious question of fact between us, that I felt myself placed in the weakest of positions.

“By this time you will fully understand, sir,” he said, “that what troubles me so dreadfully is the question, What does the spectre mean?”

I was not sure, I told him, that I did fully understand.

“What is its warning against?” he said, ruminating, with his eyes on the fire, and only by times turning them on me. “What is the danger? Where is the danger? There is danger overhanging somewhere on the Line. Some dreadful calamity will happen. It is not to be doubted this third time, after what has gone before. But surely this is a cruel haunting of me^[135]. What can I do?”

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

“If I telegraph Danger, on either side of me, or on both, I can give no reason for it^[136],” he went on, wiping the palms of his hands. “I should get into trouble, and do no good. They would think I was mad. This is the way it would work,—Message: ‘Danger! Take care!’ Answer: ‘What Danger? Where?’ Message: ‘Don’t know. But, for God’s sake, take care!’ They would displace me. What else could they do?”^[137]”

His pain of mind was most pitiable to see. It was the mental torture of a conscientious man, oppressed beyond endurance by an unintelligible responsibility involving life^[138].

“When it first stood under the Danger-light,” he went on, putting his dark hair back from his head, and drawing his hands outward across and across his temples in an extremity of feverish distress^[139], “why not tell me where that accident was to happen,—if it must happen? Why not tell me how it could be averted^[140],—if it could have been averted? When on its second coming it hid its face, why not tell me, instead, ‘She is going to die. Let them keep her at home’? If it came, on those two occasions, only to show me that its warnings were true, and so to prepare me for the third, why not warn me plainly now?”^[141] And I, Lord help me! A mere poor signalman on this solitary station! Why not go to somebody with credit to be believed, and power to act?”^[142]”

When I saw him in this state, I saw that for the poor man’s sake, as well as for the public safety, what I had to do for the time was to compose his mind^[143]. Therefore, setting aside all question of reality or unreality between us, I represented to him that whoever thoroughly discharged his duty must do well^[144], and that at least it was his comfort that he understood his duty^[145], though he did not understand these confounding Appearances. In this effort I succeeded far better than in the attempt to reason him out of his conviction. He became calm; the occupations incidental to his post as the night advanced began to make larger demands on his attention^[146]: and I left him at two in the morning. I had offered to stay through the night, but he would not hear of it^[147].

That I more than once looked back at the red light as I ascended the pathway, that I did not like the red light, and that I should have slept but poorly if my bed had been under it, I see no reason to conceal. Nor did I like the two sequences of the accident and the dead girl. I see no reason to conceal that either. But what ran most in my thoughts was the consideration how ought I to act, having become the recipient of this disclosure?^[148] I had proved the man to be intelligent, vigilant, painstaking, and exact; but how long might he remain so, in his state of mind? Though in a subordinate position, still he held a most important trust^[149], and would I

(for instance) like to stake my own life on the chances of his continuing to execute it with precision?^[150]

Unable to overcome a feeling that there would be something treacherous in my communicating what he had told me to his superiors in the Company^[151], without first being plain with himself and proposing a middle course to him^[152], I ultimately resolved to offer to accompany him (otherwise keeping his secret for the present) to the wisest medical practitioner we could hear of in those parts^[153], and to take his opinion. A change in his time of duty would come round next night, he had apprised me^[154], and he would be off an hour or two after sunrise, and on again soon after sunset. I had appointed to return accordingly^[155].

Next evening was a lovely evening, and I walked out early to enjoy it. The sun was not yet quite down when I traversed the field-path^[156] near the top of the deep cutting. I would extend my walk for an hour, I said to myself, half an hour on and half an hour back, and it would then be time to go to my signal-man’s box. Before pursuing my stroll, I stepped to the brink, and mechanically looked down, from the point from which I had first seen him. I cannot describe the thrill that seized upon me, when, close at the mouth of the tunnel, I saw the appearance of a man, with his left sleeve across his eyes, passionately waving his right arm.

The nameless horror that oppressed me passed in a moment^[157], for in a moment I saw that this appearance of a man was a man indeed^[158], and that there was a little group of other men,



He was not clear of the outer rail

standing at a short distance, to whom he seemed to be rehearsing the gesture he made. The Danger-light was not yet lighted. Against its shaft, a little low hut, entirely new to me, had been made of some wooden supports and tarpaulin^[159]. It looked no bigger than a bed.

With an irresistible sense that something was wrong,—with a flashing self-reproachful fear that fatal mischief had come of my leaving the man there^[160], and causing no one to be sent to overlook or correct what he did,—I descended the notched path with all the speed I could make^[161].

“What is the matter?” I asked the men.

“Signal-man killed this morning, sir.”

“Not the man belonging to that box?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Not the man I know?”

"You will recognise him, sir, if you knew him," said the man who spoke for the others, solemnly uncovering his own head, and raising an end of the tarpaulin, "for his face is quite composed."^[162]

"O, how did this happen, how did this happen?" I asked, turning from one to another as the hut closed in again.

"He was cut down by an engine^[163], sir. No man in England knew his work better. But somehow he was not clear of the outer rail. It was just at broad day^[164]. He had struck the light, and had the lamp in his hand^[165]. As the engine came out of the tunnel, his back was towards her, and she cut him down^[166]. That man drove her^[167], and was showing how it happened. Show the gentleman, Tom."

The man, who wore a rough dark dress, stepped back to his former place at the mouth of the tunnel.

"Coming round the curve in the tunnel, sir," he said, "I saw him at the end, like as if I saw him down a perspective-glass^[168]. There was no time to check speed^[169], and I knew him to be very careful. As he didn't seem to take heed of the whistle^[170], I shut it off when we were running down upon him, and called to him as loud as I could call^[171]."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'Below there! Look out! Look out! For God's sake, clear the way!' "

I started.

"Ah! it was a dreadful time, sir. I never left off calling to him^[172]. I put this arm before my eyes not to see, and I waved this arm to the last; but it was no use^[173]."



Below there! Look out!

Without prolonging the narrative to dwell on any one of its curious circumstances more than on any other^[174], I may, in closing it, point out the coincidence that the warning of the Engine-Driver included, not only the words which the unfortunate Signal-man had repeated to me as haunting him, but also the words which I myself—not he—had attached^[175], and that only in my own mind, to the gesticulation he had imitated^[176].

1. “HALLOA! Below there!” (*archaic*) = “HELLO! You, down there!”
2. his box = his hut
3. furled round its short pole = wrapped around (*note: furl is normally used to describe the rolling up of a flag or banner – also ‘unfurl’, meaning to unwrap a flag to show it.*)
4. considering the nature of the ground = because of the shape of the landscape
5. from what quarter the voice came (*archaic*) = which direction my voice came from
6. the steep cutting = the deep wide trench cut into the ground (for a train to pass through)
7. he turned himself about (*archaic*) = he turned round (*phrasal verb*)
8. looked down the Line = looked along the railway tracks
9. I could not have said for my life what = I would find it impossible to say why
10. to attract my notice (*archaic*) = to get/grab my attention
11. though his figure was foreshortened and shadowed = although from that angle he appeared short and poorly lit
12. steeped in the glow of an angry sunset (*idiom*) = lit up (*phrasal verb*) orange and red by the light of the setting sun
13. I had shaded my eyes with my hand = I had put my arm in front of my eyes to avoid being blinded by the sunlight
14. without pressing him too soon with a repetition of my idle question = not wanting to put him off (*phrasal verb*) his job by asking the same trivial question again
15. a violent pulsation = a forceful rhythm
16. an oncoming rush that caused me to start back (*phrasal verb*) = a strong movement towards me that made me jump backwards
17. as though it had force to draw me down (*phrasal verb*) = as if it was strong enough to pull me down (*phrasal verb*) on to the tracks
18. such vapour as rose to my height (*archaic*) = the steam that rose above the top of the cutting where I stood
19. skimming away (*phrasal verb*) over the landscape = floating off (*phrasal verb*) above the countryside
20. refurling the flag he had shown while the train went by (*phrasal verb*) = wrapping up (*phrasal verb*) the flag that he had waved at the passing train
21. he seemed to regard me with fixed attention = he appeared to be staring directly at me without looking away (*phrasal verb*)
22. by dint of looking closely about me (*formal, archaic*) = by looking carefully around (*phrasal verb*) me
23. a rough zigzag descending path notched out (*phrasal verb*) = a roughly cut path down the side of the cutting towards the railway tracks
24. unusually precipitate (*archaic*) = exceptionally steep
25. a clammy stone = a moist, sticky rock
26. a singular air of reluctance or compulsion = his strange attitude of unwillingness combined with an irresistible urge (to point out (*phrasal verb*) the path)
27. he was standing between the rails on the way by which the train had lately passed = he stood on the railway tracks on which the train had recently travelled
28. He had his left hand at his chin = his left hand was touching his chin
29. that left elbow rested on his right hand, crossed over his breast = his right hand was across his chest, supporting his left elbow
30. I stopped a moment, wondering at it = I hesitated for a moment to observe his peculiar attitude
31. stepping out upon the level of the railroad = stepping down on to the railway tracks (*note: railroad is still in standard American usage but is now replaced by ‘railway’ in British English.*)
32. drawing nearer to him = coming closer to him
33. a dark, sallow man = a dark-haired man with yellowish skin
34. His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw = his hut was in the most lonely and horrid place I have ever seen

35. a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky = an angular wall of extremely damp rock above which only a thin section of sky was visible
36. the perspective one way (*archaic*) = the view in one direction
37. a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon (*archaic*) = a continuation of this narrow prison-like structure that bent off to one side
38. in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air = which was a huge construction that gave the impression of being cruel, saddening and sinister
39. it had an earthy, deadly smell = it smelled of dirt and death
40. it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world = it made me shiver and I felt as if I were no longer in the real world
41. Before he stirred, I was near enough to him to have touched him = I had got close enough to touch him by the time he moved
42. Not even then removing his eyes from mine = Even then he did not stop staring into my eyes
43. it had riveted my attention when I looked down from up yonder (*archaic*) = I was fascinated by it when I looked down from the top of the cutting
44. not an unwelcome rarity, I hoped = I hoped it was not the sort of rare occurrence that was unwished for
45. a man who had been shut up (*phrasal verb*) within narrow limits all his life = a man who had never had the opportunity to explore the world
46. had a newly-awakened interest in these great works = had suddenly become interested in great engineering projects, such as the railways (*note: this story was written at a time of great expansion in the British railways, much of which required great feats of engineering.*)
47. To such purpose I spoke to him (*archaic*) = I spoke to him for this reason
48. besides that I am not happy in opening any conversation, there was something in the man that daunted me (*archaic*) = apart from the fact that I am uncomfortable opening a conversation, I found something about his attitude that made me feel frightened or uneasy
49. He directed a most curious look towards the red light near the tunnel's mouth = he glanced in a very strange way towards the red light at the mouth of the tunnel
50. and looked all about it, as if something were missing from it = and looked all around it carefully as though he could not see something that should have been there
51. as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face (*archaic*) = as I looked at his staring eyes and deeply serious face
52. that this was a spirit, not a man = this was a ghost rather than a real person
53. I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind (*archaic*) = Since then I have thought about (*phrasal verb*) whether he was suffering from some kind of mental illness
54. I detected in his eyes some latent fear of me = I could see from his eyes that he was secretly afraid of me
55. This put the monstrous thought to flight (*archaic*) = This got rid of my terrible thought that he might be a ghost
56. Intently watchful of me = Staring at me in a highly focused way
57. be that as it may, I never was there, you may swear = regardless of that, I promise you I was never over by the light
58. His manner cleared, like my own (*formal*) = His mood lightened and so did mine
59. he had enough responsibility to bear = he had a responsible job
60. the routine of his life had shaped itself into that form (*archaic*) = he had become used to working in that way
61. a poor hand at figures (*archaic, idiom*) = not very good at mathematics
62. Under some conditions there would be less upon the Line than under others = In certain situations there would be fewer trains passing through than on others

63. In bright weather, he did choose occasions for getting a little above these lower shadows = When the weather was fine, he took the opportunity to climb up (*phrasal verb*) out of the cutting
64. being at all times liable to be called by his electric bell = although he needed to be able to respond to the electric bell whenever it sounded
65. an official book in which he had to make certain entries = a log book where he had to record important information
66. a telegraphic instrument = a machine that allowed him to send and receive messages by telegraph
67. On my trusting that he would excuse the remark that he had been well educated (*archaic*) = On my understanding that he had received a good education
68. educated above that station = more highly qualified for his job than he needed to be
69. instances of slight incongruity in such wise = examples of this kind of inconsistency
70. would rarely be found wanting among large bodies of men = were often common in large groups of people that worked together (*note: this long and complicated sentence could be paraphrased in modern English as follows: "Although he assured me he was well-educated and probably more qualified for this job than he needed to be, he observed that this situation is common in large companies or institutions".*)
71. that last desperate resource = the last available job opportunity for some people (*note: this comment reflects Dickens's not very favourable view of the Army!*)
72. a student of natural philosophy = somebody who studied the natural world (*note: in the nineteenth century before the development of the modern sciences, this would most likely have described someone who studied a combination of physics and biology.*)
73. he had run wild, misused his opportunities, gone down (*phrasal verb*), and never risen again = he had behaved in an uncontrolled way, squandered his chances, lost his position in society and never regained it
74. He had made his bed, and he lay upon it (*idiom*) = He was suffering the consequences of his previous actions (*note: the idiom 'make your own bed and lie on it' is still commonly heard.*)
75. All that I have here condensed (*archaic*) = Everything I have summarised in this story
76. his grave, dark regards divided between me and the fire (*archaic*) = as he stared seriously at me and then at the fire
77. as though to request me to understand that he claimed to be nothing but what I found him (*archaic*) = as if he wanted me to understand that he was not pretending to be any better than he was
78. without the door (*archaic – we still say 'within' but not 'without'.*) = outside the door
79. In the discharge of his duties (*formal, archaic*) = While doing his job
80. breaking off his discourse at a syllable (*archaic*) = Immediately stopping the conversation even halfway through a word (so that he could do his job)
81. I should have set this man down as (*phrasal verb - archaic*) one of the safest of men to be employed in that capacity = I would have had him down as (*phrasal verb - modern*) the best type of person to be doing that kind of job / I would have thought of him as the best kind of person to be doing that kind of job
82. he twice broke off (*phrasal verb*) with a fallen colour = twice he stopped talking and went pale
83. with the inexplicable air upon him which I had remarked, without being able to define, when we were so far asunder (*archaic*) = in the impossible-to-understand mood that I had noticed, but had not been able to describe when we had stood a long way apart
84. I am afraid I must acknowledge that I said it to lead him on (*phrasal verb*) = I am sorry but I have to admit that I said this to trick him into saying more
85. It is very difficult to impart (*archaic*) = It is very hard for me to tell you
86. I expressly intend to make you another visit = I certainly mean to visit you again
87. His manner seemed to make the place strike colder to me = The way in which he behaved make the place seem even more sinister
88. I cried something to that effect = I shouted something like that
89. Admit those were the very words (*archaic*) = Even if those were the exact words I said.

90. You had no feeling that they were conveyed to you in any supernatural way? = You did not have the sensation that the words were spoken through you by some supernatural force?
91. I walked by the side of the down Line of rails = I walked beside the railway tracks
92. It was easier to mount than to descend = I found it easier to climb up (*phrasal verb*) out of the cutting than it had been going down. (*phrasal verb*)
93. I got back (*phrasal verb*) to my inn without any adventure = I returned to the inn without any problems
94. Good-night, then, and here's my hand = Greetings, let me shake you by the hand
(*note: in modern English we would only say 'goodnight' to someone who was about to go to bed; here, the men are just greeting each other at night, in the same way that we might still say today 'Good morning' or 'Good evening'!*)
95. I took you for (*phrasal verb*) some one else yesterday evening = When I met you last night, I thought you were somebody else
96. I started up (*phrasal verb*) = I jumped up (*phrasal verb*) in fright
97. I caught up (*phrasal verb*) my lamp, turned it on red, and ran towards the figure = I lit my lamp, turned the colour to red and headed in the direction of the figure
98. I advanced so close upon it that I wondered at its keeping the sleeve across its eyes = I got so close to the figure that I could not understand why it kept its arm up across its eyes
99. had my hand stretched out (*phrasal verb*) to pull the sleeve away, when it was gone = reached up (*phrasal verb*) to pull his arm away from his eye, but it disappeared
100. five hundred yards = 460 metres
101. saw the figures of the measured distance = saw the distance markers painted onto the walls of the tunnel
102. the wet stains stealing down the walls and trickling through the arch = the damp patches where water had leaked in through the walls and roof of the tunnel
103. I had a mortal abhorrence of the place upon me (*archaic*) = I was scared for my life inside the tunnel
104. I went up (*phrasal verb*) the iron ladder to the gallery atop of it (*archaic*) = I climbed the iron ladder up the side of the danger-light to the ledge at the top of it
105. Resisting the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine = Attempting to avoid the feeling of an icy finger moving down my back (*note: here the narrator describes how he is trying to maintain a rational position and avoid being frightened by the supernatural details of the story.*)
106. this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight (*archaic*) = the figure must be a figment of his imagination
107. the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye (*formal. archaic*) = the tiny nerves that control the eyes
108. had become conscious of the nature of their affliction = had realised that they were ill (and so were seeing things that were not real)
109. do but listen for a moment to the wind in this unnatural valley (*archaic*) = just listen to the sound the wind makes when it blows through this deep trench dug into the ground
110. the wild harp it makes of the telegraph wires (*metaphor*) = the sound it makes as it whistles through the telegraph wires
111. he would beg to remark that he had not finished = he wanted me to know that his story was not over (*phrasal verb*)
112. Within six hours after the Appearance, the memorable accident on this Line happened = Less than six hours after he had seen the figure, the well-known accident occurred on this stretch of railway
113. A disagreeable shudder crept over me, but I did my best against it = I began to shudder from fright, but managed to resist it
114. I rejoined (*archaic*) = I replied
115. calculated deeply to impress his mind = that would certainly have made a strong impression on him

116. I thought I saw that he was going to bring the objection to bear upon me (*archaic*) = I believed he would argue against what I said
117. men of common sense did not allow much for coincidences in making the ordinary calculations of life (*archaic*) = sensible people do not take notice of superstition when deciding how to lead their daily lives
118. with both hands before the face (*archaic*) = having both hands in front of the face
119. I have seen such an attitude in stone figures on tombs = I have seen statues on graves in this pose
120. Nothing came of this? (*archaic*) = Nothing happened as a result of this?
121. He shut off (*phrasal verb*), and put his brake on, but the train drifted past here a hundred and fifty yards or more = He stopped the engine and applied the brake, but the train kept moving for another 140 metres or more
122. I could think of nothing to say, to any purpose = I was unable to think of anything useful to say
123. The wind and the wires took up (*phrasal verb*) the story with a long lamenting wail = The conversation was replaced by the noise of the wind whistling through the telegraph wires
124. mark this, and judge how my mind is troubled = Listen to this and then you'll understand why I am so troubled
125. Ever since, it has been there, now and again, by fits and starts (*idiom*) = Since that time the figure has repeatedly appeared from time to time
126. that former gesticulation of, "For God's sake, clear the way!" = the gesture I described before to indicate "Get out of the way!"
127. Why, see... how your imagination misleads you. = This is an example of how you are being fooled by your imagination
128. and if I am a living man, it did NOT ring at those times = I swear to you that the bell did not ring when you said it did
129. The ghost's ring is a strange vibration in the bell that it derives from nothing else (*archaic*) = When the bell is rung by the ghost it makes a noise that is not caused by any external factor (such as the usual electric current)
130. I have not asserted that the bell stirs to the eye (*archaic*) = I did not tell you that the bell moves (as it would do if rung by an electric current)
131. taking particular note of his face = Looking carefully at his face
132. His eyes were prominent and strained = His eyes bulged out (*phrasal verb*) and looked tired
133. We went in again, shut the door, and resumed our seats (*archaic*) = We re-entered the hut, closed the door and sat back down (*phrasal verb*) again
134. I was thinking how best to improve this advantage (*archaic*) = I was trying to think of a way to make further points (to counter his argument)
135. surely this is a cruel haunting of me (*archaic*) = I am convinced that I am being haunted in cruel way
136. If I telegraph Danger, on either side of me, or on both, I can give no reason for it = If I send a warning message to the signalmen up and down the line, but cannot explain the nature of the danger
137. They would displace me (*archaic*). What else could they do? = I would be fired from my job, because my superiors would believe that I could no longer do it – they would have no other choice
138. oppressed beyond endurance by an unintelligible responsibility involving life = whose life was made unbearable by the crushing responsibility of keeping people's lives safe
139. drawing his hands outward across and across his temples in an extremity of feverish distress = rubbing his hands repeatedly across his temples in a restless and distressed way
140. Why not tell me how it could be averted? = Why not tell me how to avoid this future accident?
141. why not warn me plainly now? = why not tell me exactly what danger I am in?

142. Why not go to somebody with credit to be believed, and power to act? = Why not explain the situation to someone who was trustworthy and had sufficient influence to change the situation?
143. what I had to do for the time was to compose his mind (*archaic*) = the most important thing at that moment was to calm him down (*phrasal verb*)
144. I represented to him that whoever thoroughly discharged his duty must do well (*archaic*) = I explained to him that anyone who does his job thoroughly does it well
145. at least it was his comfort that he understood his duty = he was consoled by the fact that he knew what was required of him in his job
146. the occupations incidental to his post as the night advanced began to make larger demands on his attention = as the time passed he needed to devote more time to the important aspects of his job
147. I had offered to stay through the night, but he would not hear of it = I had told him I was happy to stay until morning, but he refused my offer
148. But what ran most in my thoughts was the consideration how ought I to act, having become the recipient of this disclosure? (*archaic*) = But what worried me the most was what to do now that he had told me all this
149. Though in a subordinate position, still he held a most important trust = although he did not have a very senior job, he had great responsibility
150. would I... like to stake my own life on the chances of his continuing to execute it with precision? (*archaic*) = could I be so sure that he would still be able to do the job safely and accurately that I would be prepared to put my own life in his hands?
151. there would be something treacherous in my communicating what he had told me to his superiors in the Company = it would betray his trust for me to tell his bosses what he had told me
152. without first being plain with himself and proposing a middle course to him (*archaic*) = without initially explaining the situation clearly and suggesting a possible alternative course of action
153. the wisest medical practitioner we could hear of in those parts = the most renowned doctor in the local area
154. A change in his time of duty would come round (*phrasal verb*) next night, he had apprised me (*archaic*) = He explained to me that his shift would be at a different time the following night
155. I had appointed to return accordingly (*archaic*) = So I agreed to come back (*phrasal verb*) at that time
156. The sun was not yet quite down when I traversed the field-path (*archaic*) = the sun had not yet set when I crossed the field
157. The nameless horror that oppressed me passed in a moment = My overwhelming fear of the ghostly figure suddenly disappeared
158. in a moment I saw that this appearance of a man was a man indeed (*archaic*) = I immediately realised that this was a real person
159. Against its shaft, a little low hut, entirely new to me, had been made of some wooden supports and tarpaulin = A new hut, that I had never seen before, made of wooden poles and tarpaulin had been built next to the upright pole of the danger-light
160. with a flashing self-reproachful fear that fatal mischief had come of my leaving the man there (*archaic*) = With the sudden awful regret that he might have died because I did not stay with him through the night
161. with all the speed I could make (*archaic*) = as quickly as I could
162. You will recognise him... for his face is quite composed. = You will recognise him, because his face has not been mutilated
163. He was cut down (*phrasal verb*) by an engine = He was hit by a passing train
164. It was just at broad day = It was just after dawn (when fully light)
165. He had struck the light, and had the lamp in his hand = He had lit his lamp and was carrying it

166. As the engine came out of the tunnel, his back was towards her, and she cut him down (*phrasal verb*) = When the train emerged from the tunnel, he was facing away from it and he was knocked over (*note: here the narrator refers to the train engine as female.*)
167. That man drove her = That man was the driver of the train
168. like as if I saw him down a perspective-glass = as though I saw him through a telescope
169. There was no time to check speed (*archaic*) = I did not have time to slow the train down (*phrasal verb*)
170. he didn't seem to take heed of the whistle = he apparently took no notice of the train whistle
171. I shut it off (*phrasal verb*) when we were running down upon him, and called to him as loud as I could call = I stopped the whistle as we approached him and shouted as loudly as I could
172. I never left off (*phrasal verb, informal*) calling to him = I never stopped shouting at him
173. I put this arm before my eyes not to see, and I waved this arm to the last; but it was no use (*archaic*) = I covered my eyes with this arm and waved the other arm as long as I could, but it made no difference
174. Without prolonging the narrative to dwell on any one of its curious circumstances more than on any other = Without wishing to make the story longer by repeating any particular detail
175. the words which I myself had attached (*archaic*) = the words that I had originally imagined
176. to the gesticulation he had imitated = along with the gesture that he had performed

The End
The Signalman
by Charles Dickens
Read by Ross Armstrong for DailyStep English
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