

Unit 2

The Signalman

A premonition is a strong feeling that something—usually unpleasant—is going to happen. Many famous personalities of history had a premonition or a warning of their impending death. Julius Caesar, famous general and consul of ancient Rome, Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy, both presidents of the USA, were warned by seers and family members that there was a possibility of them being killed by political enemies. They ignored these warnings and were assassinated.

Share with the class any such experience you may have encountered or may have read about.

‘Halloa! Below there!’

When he heard a voice thus calling to him, instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting 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.

‘Halloa! Below!’ I called out again.

Raising his eyes, he saw my figure high above him.

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

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 found a rough zigzag descending path notched¹ out, which I followed.

The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate². It was made through a clammy³ stone that became oozy and wetter as I went down.

His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky. At one end

¹notched carved ²precipitate steep ³clammy damp and slimy

of the long corridor of stone was the gloomy entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air. At the mouth of the tunnel was a red light. 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.

Drawing nearer to him, I saw that he was a dark ⁴sallow man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows. His attitude was one of such expectation and watchfulness that I stopped a moment, wondering at it.

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. He was several times interrupted by the little bell, and had to read off⁵ messages, and send replies. Once he had to stand without⁶ the door, 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 those occasions, he came back to the fire with the inexplicable air⁷ upon him which I had earlier noticed. When I asked him what the matter was he replied in a low voice, 'I am troubled, sir, I am troubled.'

'With what? What is your trouble?'

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

'I will come at eleven tomorrow.'

Punctual to my appointment, I reached his box the next night as the distant clocks were striking eleven and sat down by the fire.

⁴sallow of an unhealthy, pale complexion ⁵read off read out

⁶without outside ⁷inexplicable air mysterious look/expression



As soon as we were seated, he started speaking in a tone but a little above a whisper.

'One moonlit night, about a year ago,' said the man, 'I was sitting here, when I heard a voice cry, "Halloa! Below there!" I started up, looked from that door, and saw someone standing by the red light near the tunnel, waving with one hand, the other covering his eyes. The voice seemed hoarse with shouting, and it cried, "Look out! Look out!"'

'I caught up my lamp, turned it on red, and ran towards the figure, 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. I ran right up at it and had my hand stretched out to pull the sleeve away, when it was gone.'

After we had sat silently for a while, he slowly added these words, touching my arm:

'Within six hours after the Appearance, the memorable accident on this Line happened, 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.

'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 spectre⁸ 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. 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.

'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?'

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. 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. I could think of nothing to say, to any purpose, and my mouth was very dry.

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

'At the light?'

'At the danger-light.'

'What does it seem to do?'

⁸spectre ghost

He repeated, if possible with increased passion and vehemence⁹, that former gesticulation¹⁰ of, 'For God's sake, clear the way!'

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

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. 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.'

He shook his head. '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. What troubles me so dreadfully, Sir, 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, ruminating¹¹, 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 haunting¹² of me. What can I do? A mere poor signalman on this solitary station! Why not go to somebody with credit to be believed, and power to act?'

His pain of mind was most pitiable to see.

He gradually became calmer; the occupations incidental¹³ to his post as the night advanced began to make larger demands on his attention and I left him at two in the morning. I had offered to stay through the night, but he would not hear of it.

⁹vehemence great intensity of feeling or expression ¹⁰gesticulation a dramatic gesture
¹¹ruminating thinking deeply ¹²haunting place of stay ¹³incidental appropriate

Next evening, on my way back to the signalman's post, I 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.

With an irresistible sense that something was wrong, I descended the notched path with all the speed I could make.

'What is the matter?' I asked the group of men gathered at the mouth of the tunnel.

'Signalman killed this morning, Sir.'

'Not the man belonging to that box?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'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, 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. He had struck the light, and had the lamp in his hand. As the engine came out of the tunnel, his back was towards her, and she cut him down. That man drove her 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-glass¹⁴. There was no time to check speed and I knew him to be very careful. As he didn't seem to take heed¹⁵ of the whistle, I shut it off when we were running down upon him, and called to him as loud as I could call.'

'What did you say?'

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

I started¹⁶.

'Ah! It was a dreadful time, Sir. I never left off calling to him. I put this arm before my eyes not to see, and I waved this arm to the last; but it was no use.'

Abridged

CHARLES DICKENS

¹⁴**perspective-glass** a kind of telescope ¹⁵**heed** pay attention to

¹⁶**started** gave a small jump from surprise or alarm