

Lesson 2

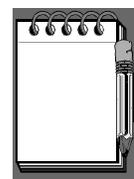
A Ghost Story: “The Signalman”

Materials Needed:

▣ journal
✎ pen or pencil
highlighter (optional)

Journal Entry

Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not? Write about ghosts and/or ghostly things in your journal. Write for about ten minutes.



The Ghost Story

In the next two lessons, you are going to be reading a story about a ghost. In a ghost story, plot is built around the supernatural (something which is not attributable to natural forces). Usually the conflict is between the supernatural elements and the human beings they affect. In the case of this story, however, the conflict is between the narrator and the railroad employee who is being haunted by a ghost. The first person narrator in this story tries to explain that supernatural forces do not really exist. He tries to tell the signalman that it is coincidence or his imagination that is “haunting” him, not a ghost.

About the Author

Charles Dickens is a famous British author who lived from 1812 – 1870. He had a very difficult childhood. He came from a poor family and had to go to work at a very young age. Many of the novels and stories he has written criticize the society which mistreated and abused the poor, especially the children of the poor. However, the story you are about to read does not deal with this subject.

Vocabulary

Add these words to your vocabulary:



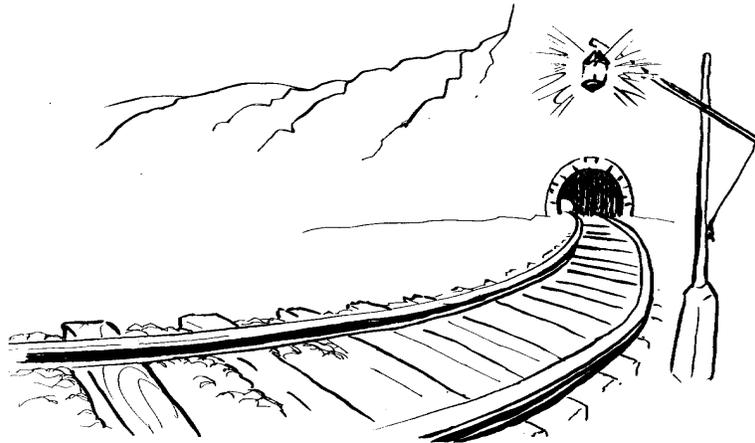
Word	Definition	Example
precipitate	steep	“The cutting was extremely deep and unusually <i>precipitate</i> .”
singular	being the only one of its kind, unique	“. . . I found the way long enough to give me time to recall a <i>singular</i> air of reluctance . . . with which he had pointed out the path.”
sallow	a sickly pale yellow	“I . . . drawing nearer to him saw that he was a dark <i>sallow</i> man, with a dark beard and rather heavy <i>eyebrows</i> .”
peruse	to examine in detail; to read carefully	“The monstrous thought came into my mind, as I <i>perused</i> the fixed eyes and the <i>saturnine</i> face, that this was a spirit, not a man.”
saturnine	sluggish, gloomy	
vehemence	intense feeling; great force	“I followed his action with my eyes, and it was the action of an arm <i>gesticulating</i> , with the utmost passion and <i>vehemence</i> .”
gesticulate	communicate excitedly by gestures and movements	
specter	ghost	“Six or seven months passed . . . when one morning . . . I . . . looked towards the red light, and saw the <i>specter</i> again.”

About the Story

“The Signalman” is a story that deals with a ghost. A railroad worker, a signalman, continues to see a ghost. Each sighting is followed by a disastrous event. The narrator meets the signalman and tries to convince him that there is no ghost, that it is just his imagination at work. If you go to www.librivox.com you will be able to listen to the story while you read it.

Reading Assignment

Read the first part of the story below and then answer the questions which follow. You may want to look at the questions beforehand in order to help you to better understand what you read. A note of advice: This is a somewhat difficult story and may require a couple of readings before you understand everything that happens. It may help you to use your highlighter to mark certain passages that are not quite clear the first time.



The Signalman

by Charles Dickens

“Halloa! 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, furred 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 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. But I know it was remarkable enough to attract my notice, even though his figure was foreshortened and shadowed, down in the deep trench, 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, and, raising his eyes, saw my figure high above him.

5 “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 vapor 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 of looking closely about me, I found a rough zigzag

descending path notched out, which I followed.

The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate. It was made through a clammy stone, that became oozy 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 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 sallow 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 jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way only a crooked prolongation of this great
10 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 forbidding 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 riveted 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 used; for, besides that I am not happy in opening any conversation, there was something in the man that daunted 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
15 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."

20 "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."

25 “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 labor - 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, 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 offense) perhaps educated above that station, he observed that instances of slight incongruity in such wise would rarely be found wanting among large bodies of men; that he had heard it was so in workhouses, 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, 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, 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 color, 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.

Said I, when I rose to leave him, "You almost make me think that I have
30 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
35 you another visit. Say, when shall it be?"

"I go off early in the morning, and I shall be on again at ten tomorrow 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
40 tomorrow night, don't call out! Let me ask you a parting question. What made you cry, 'Halloa! Below there!' tonight?"

"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
45 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 line 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 someone else yesterday evening. That troubles me."

"That mistake?"

"No. That someone else."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know."

55 "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, 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, 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.”

“Into the tunnel,” said I.

“No. I ran on into the tunnel, five hundred yards. I stopped, and held my lamp above my head, and saw the figures of the measured distance, and saw the wet stains stealing down the walls and trickling through the arch. I ran out again faster than I had run in (for I had a mortal abhorrence of the place

60 upon me), and I looked all round the red light with my own red light, and I went up the iron ladder to the gallery top of it, 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, I showed him

how that this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight; and how that figures, originating in disease of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye, were known to have often troubled patients, some of whom had become conscious of the nature of their affliction, 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 while we speak so low, and to the wild harp it makes of the telegraph wires!”

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. 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, 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. It was not to be denied, I rejoined, that this was a remarkable coincidence, calculated deeply to impress his mind. 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), men of common sense did not allow much for coincidences in making the ordinary calculations of life.

65 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 specter again.” He stopped, with a fixed look at me.

“Did it cry out?”

“No. It was silent.”

70 “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.

“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

75 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, but the train drifted past here a hundred and fifty yards or more. 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 on this floor between us.”

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

80 “True, sir. True. Precisely as it happened, so I tell it you.”

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

(to be continued)

Reading Comprehension: Answer most questions in complete sentences. You may need to confirm your answers by going back into the text.

1. Explain the signalman’s first reaction to the narrator.

2. Describe the signalman as the narrator describes him.

3. Describe the setting. How is it appropriate for this story?

_____ 4. How does the signalman behave toward the narrator during their first encounter?

- a. The signalman is happy to see the narrator.
- b. The signalman is afraid of the narrator.
- c. The signalman realizes he knows the narrator.
- d. The signalman turns and runs from the narrator.

5. Explain what you have learned about the signalman's past and why he does this job for a living.

_____ 6. Which of the following tasks is NOT part of the signalman's job?

- a. change the signal
- b. turn the iron handle
- c. read and send messages
- d. conduct the train

7. When the narrator promises to return the next day, explain what the signalman asks him NOT to do?

8. The next day the narrator learns about the specter (ghost) that has been appearing to the signalman.

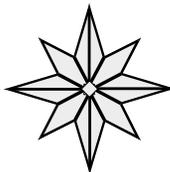
a. Describe the first appearance of the ghost and the consequences.

b. Describe the second appearance and the consequences.

9. How does the narrator try to explain these occurrences to the signalman?



Complete Section B (pg. 105) in the Grammar Groomer Appendix.



End of Lesson 2