

**A VOICE FROM THE SIGNAL-
BOX: OR, RAILWAY
ACCIDENTS AND THEIR
CAUSES, BY A SIGNALMAN**

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A Voice from the Signal-box: Or, Railway Accidents and Their Causes, By a Signalman by
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AND THEIR CAUSES.

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A SIGNALMAN.

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INTRODUCTION.

TO M. T. BASS, Esq., M.P.

March 2nd, 1874.

SIR,

HAVING carefully perused the MSS. written by a signalman on the causes and remedies of railway accidents, which you did me the honour to place in my hands some days ago, I beg to report that they contain particulars of many startling defects in our railway system which have not hitherto (so far as I am aware) been brought under public notice. A very natural impression prevails amongst the public that railway travelling is very unsafe, owing to the frequency and terrible destructiveness of accidents during the past twelve months. The remarks of this pointsman show that it is a marvel that so few casualties occur on our busy lines, and that sooner or later we may confidently expect a series of disasters unparalleled in the history of railways. I have no

hesitation in saying, therefore, that if published, the book would be of great use in directing general attention to this important subject. It undoubtedly throws a flood of light upon the causes of railway catastrophes of all kinds.

I have found it desirable to cut out many portions of the original MSS., some of which were irrelevant, and others repeated in different parts of the work, but the construction of the sentences has not been altered, except in cases where the meaning was somewhat obscure.

The writer commences by stating that he has had many years experience as a signalman at one of the most frequented and complicated junctions to be found in this country. His hours of duty, as a rule, are eight per diem, during which period he is required to move levers sixteen hundred times, and give two thousand signals by telegraph.

He shows that, notwithstanding the important part played by signals in the working of railways, the signalman is frequently very imperfectly instructed in their use. This official has often to learn his duties as best he can from his predecessor. He goes through a theoretical examination at the office of the Superintendent of the Line, it is true, but this does not in any way test his practical ability to perform the duties. Such a practice must necessarily be fraught with the greatest danger to railway passengers. The

block system, the interlocking apparatus, or any other signalling arrangement calculated to ensure safety, is worse than useless in the hands of untrained men, and not unfrequently becomes, in fact, under those circumstances, an instrument of destruction. The writer remarks that the superintendent or inspector who examines signalmen previous to their taking charge of a box, is seldom practically acquainted with the manipulation of signals, and in a difficulty an officer of this class will occasionally appeal to the signalmen to know "what is the usual practice in such cases!" He recommends that experienced signal-workers be appointed to superintend the training of all new hands.

He points out that at present there is no means of preventing engine-drivers, who have been standing with their trains in branches or sidings, from running on to the main line while the signals are against them, to the destruction of some passing train, and states that by introducing into all such sidings and branches, safety points interlocked with the signals, so as to turn away, on to a separate line, with a dead stop-block at the end, any train which attempted a movement of this kind, accidents from the cause named could be entirely done away with. A serious collision of this nature, it may be remarked, occurred a short time ago on the Great Northern Railway at Boston.

He comments on the utter inadequacy of the present arrangements for signalling from sidings (situated at a distance from the signal-box) to the signalman on duty. A gong is generally used (as at West Drayton, where a most serious accident took place some weeks ago), and the man at the cabin having many signals and levers to attend to, may easily forget what number of beats has been given, and allow a train to rush forward when the line is blocked. To remedy this defect he suggests that an indicator be substituted for the gong to show continuously "line blocked" or "line clear," as the case may be, and that this instrument be worked from the sidings by a lever which should always be kept locked over. The last of these recommendations, I may observe, has also been made by the Government Inspector, Captain Tyler, who inquired into the cause of the West Drayton collision.

He states that sufficient attention is not paid by railway authorities to suggestions for the improved working of signals and points made by signalmen, and gives two cases where he himself pointed out serious irregularities with no better effect; the consequences being that in one case an accident occurred shortly afterwards, and in the other a disastrous collision was providentially averted. Since then the alterations he ventured to suggest have been made.

He complains loudly of the system practised by the railway companies, of harassing their signalmen with letters of inquiry respecting paltry delays to trains at busy junctions. This, he emphatically asserts, is productive of many accidents by causing the men to be too anxious to get trains past their boxes without detention. For they often allow trains to follow each other with too short an interval of space between ; or permit two trains to cross a junction almost simultaneously, to the destruction of one or other of them. The collisions near Bolton on the Lancashire and Yorkshire line in December last, occurred under circumstances similar to those above described.

He states that signalmen are wretchedly underpaid; that promotion is invariably denied them ; and that their occupation is calculated to "impair the strongest of minds, and make them careworn and melancholy."

He calls attention to the fact that in foggy weather signals fixed at a considerable distance from the ground are of no use whatever, because the engine-men of many express trains are obliged to rush by them without noticing whether they are on or off. To remove this shortcoming he considers it desirable that a second signal arm and lamp should be fixed on each post about the height of the driver on his engine. There would then be no difficulty whatever