

A Christmas Carol


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1: MARLEY'S GHOST

Marley was dead. There is no doubt whatever about that. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.

Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. Scrooge and he were partners. Scrooge was his sole friend and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event. Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: *Scrooge and Marley*.

Oh - he was tight-fisted, Scrooge! Hard and sharp as flint. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue. A frost was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge.

Once upon a time - on Christmas Eve - old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather and he could hear the people outside go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement to warm them. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense that the houses opposite were mere phantoms.

The door of Scrooge's counting-house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, Bob Cratchit, who in a small dismal little room beyond, was copying letters. Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room.

'A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!' It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who came upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of his approach.

'Bah!' said Scrooge, 'Humbug!'

This nephew of Scrooge's had so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost that he was all a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkled.

'Christmas a humbug, uncle!' said Scrooge's nephew. 'You don't mean that, I'm sure.'

'I do,' said Scrooge. 'Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough.'

'Come, then,' returned the nephew gaily. 'What right have you to be dismal? What right have you to be morose? You're rich enough.'

Scrooge, having no better answer, said 'Bah!' again; and followed it up with 'Humbug.'

'Don't be cross, uncle,' said the nephew.

'What else can I be,' returned Scrooge, 'when I live in such a world of fools?'



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'Uncle!' pleaded the nephew.

'Keep Christmas in your own way,' returned the uncle, sternly, 'and let me keep it in mine.'

'Keep it!' repeated Scrooge's nephew. 'But you don't keep it.'

'Let me leave it alone, then,' said Scrooge. 'Much good Christmas has ever done you!' he added.

'I'm sure I have always thought of Christmas as a good time,' said the nephew. 'A kind, forgiving, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long year, when men and women seem to open their hearts freely. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!'

The clerk, Bob Cratchit, involuntarily applauded. But becoming immediately sensible of the impropriety, he poked the fire, and extinguished the last frail spark for ever.

'Let me hear another sound from you,' said Scrooge, 'and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your situation!'

'Don't be angry, uncle,' continued Scrooge's nephew. 'Come! Dine with us to-morrow.'

'Good afternoon,' said Scrooge.

'I want nothing from you; I ask nothing of you; why cannot we be friends?'

'Good afternoon,' said Scrooge.

'I'm sorry, with all my heart. But I'll keep my

Christmas humour to the last. So A Merry Christmas, uncle!'

'Good afternoon!' said Scrooge.

His nephew stopped at the outer door to bestow the greetings of the season on the clerk, who - cold as he was - was warmer than Scrooge, for he returned them cordially.

'There's another fellow,' muttered Scrooge; who overheard him: 'my clerk, Bob Cratchit, with fifteen shillings a week, and a wife and a family, talking about a merry Christmas. Humbug!'

Bob, in letting Scrooge's nephew out, had let two other people in. They were portly gentlemen, pleasant to behold, and now stood, with their hats off, in Scrooge's office.

'Scrooge and Marley's, I believe,' said one of the gentlemen. 'Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr Scrooge, or Mr Marley?'

'Mr Marley has been dead these seven years,' Scrooge replied. 'He died seven years ago, this very night.'

'At this festive season of the year, Mr Scrooge,' said the gentleman, taking up a pen, 'it is desirable that we should make some slight provision for the poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at this present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessities; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir.'

'Are there no prisons?' asked Scrooge.

'Plenty of prisons,' said the gentleman.

'And the workhouses?' demanded Scrooge. 'Are they still in operation?'



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'They are,' returned the gentleman.

'Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course,' said Scrooge. 'I'm very glad to hear it.'

'A few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth,' continued the gentleman. 'We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt. What shall I put you down for?'

'Nothing!' Scrooge replied.

'You wish to remain anonymous?'

'I wish to be left alone,' said Scrooge. 'Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned: they cost enough and those who are badly off must go there.'

'Many would rather die than go to prison or the workhouse,' said the gentleman.

'If they would rather die,' said Scrooge, 'they'd better do it, and decrease the surplus population.'

Seeing clearly that it would be useless to pursue their point, the gentlemen withdrew and Scrooge resumed his labours.

Meanwhile the fog and darkness thickened. The ancient tower of a church, whose old bell was always peeping down at Scrooge, became invisible, and struck the hours and quarters in the clouds, with a tremulous vibration as

if its teeth were chattering. Piercing, searching, biting cold. A young boy stooped down at Scrooge's keyhole to regale him with a Christmas carol: but at the first sound of 'God bless you, merry gentleman!' Scrooge seized his ruler with such energy that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and frost.

At length the hour of shutting up the counting-house arrived. With an ill-will Scrooge dismounted from his stool, and the clerk - Bob Cratchit - instantly snuffed his candle out and put on his hat.

'You'll want all Christmas day off tomorrow, I suppose?' said Scrooge.

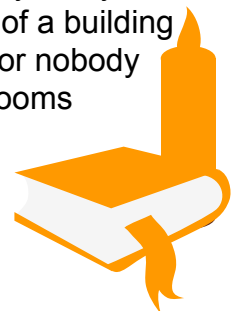
'If quite convenient, Sir,' said Bob.

'It's not convenient,' said Scrooge, 'and it's not fair. If I was to stop half-a-crown for it, you'd think yourself ill-used, I'll be bound? And yet,' he continued, 'you don't think me ill-used, when I pay a day's wages for no work.'

The clerk smiled faintly and observed that it was only once a year.

'A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!' said Scrooge, buttoning his coat to the chin. 'Be here all the earlier next morning!' And Bob Cratchit promised that he would.

Scrooge took his melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern and went home to bed. He lived in chambers which had once belonged to his deceased partner, Jacob Marley. They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a pile of a building up a yard. It was old and dreary, for nobody lived in it but Scrooge, the other rooms being all let out as offices.



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The yard was so dark that even Scrooge, who knew its every stone, had to grope with his hands.

Now, it is a fact that there was nothing at all particular about the knocker on the door, except that it was very large. It's also a fact that Scrooge had seen it, night and morning, during his whole residence in that place; also, that Scrooge had little of what is called 'fancy' about him. Let it also be borne in mind that Scrooge had not bestowed one thought on Marley, since his last mention of his dead partner that afternoon. And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his key in the lock of the door, saw in the knocker, not a knocker...but Marley's face.

It was not in shadow as the other objects in the yard were, but had a dismal light about it. It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly spectacles turned upon its ghostly forehead.

To say that Scrooge was not startled would be untrue. But he put his hand upon the key, turned it sturdily, walked in, and lighted his candle.

He did pause before he shut the door to look cautiously behind it first. But there was nothing on the back except the screws and nuts that held the knocker on, so he closed it with a bang.

The sound resounded through the house like thunder. Every room above, and below, appeared to have a separate peal of echoes of its own. But Scrooge was not a man to be frightened by echoes, so he fastened the door, walked across the hall and up the stairs.

Up Scrooge went. But before he shut his heavy door, he walked through his rooms to see that all was right. Sitting-room, bed-room. All as they should be. Nobody under the table; nobody under the sofa; nobody under the bed. Quite satisfied, he closed his door, locked himself in and thus secured against surprise, he put on his dressing-gown and slippers and his night-cap and sat down before the fire.

As he threw his head back in the chair, his glance happened to rest upon a bell, a disused bell, that hung in the room. It was with great astonishment and dread that, as he looked, he saw this bell begin to swing. It swung so softly in the outset that it scarcely made a sound; but soon it rang out loudly, and so did every bell in the house.

This might have lasted a minute, but it seemed an hour. The bells ceased as they had begun, together. They were succeeded by a clanking noise, deep down below; as if some person were dragging a heavy chain in the cellar. Scrooge then remembered to have heard that ghosts in haunted houses were described as dragging chains.

The cellar-door flew open with a booming sound, and then he heard the noise much louder, on the floors below; then coming up the stairs; then coming straight towards the door.

'It's humbug still!' said Scrooge. 'I won't believe it.'

His colour changed though, when, without a pause, a figure came on through the heavy door, and passed into the room before his eyes.

The same face: the very same. Jacob Marley!

