A CHRISTMAS CAROL

IN PROSE

BEING

A Ghost Story of Christmas

by Charles Dickens

PREFACE

I HAVE endeavoured in this Ghostly little book,

to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my

readers out of humour with themselves, with each other,

with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses

pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Their faithful Friend and Servant,

C. D.

December, 1843.

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STAVE I: MARLEY'S GHOST

MARLEY was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt

whatever about that. The register of his burial was

signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker,

and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and

Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he

chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a

door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my

own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about

a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to

regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery

in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors

is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands

shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You

will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that

Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did.

How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were

partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge

was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole

assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend, and

sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully

cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent

man of business on the very day of the funeral,

and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain.

The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to

the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley

was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or

nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going

to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that

Hamlet's Father died before the play began, there

would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a

stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts,

than there would be in any other middle-aged

gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy

spot--say Saint Paul's Churchyard for instance--

literally to astonish his son's weak mind.

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name.

There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse

door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as

Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the

business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley,

but he answered to both names. It was all the

same to him.

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone,

Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping,

clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint,

from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire;

secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The

cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed

nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his

eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his

grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his

eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low

temperature always about with him; he iced his office in

the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

External heat and cold had little influence on

Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather

chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he,

no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no

pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't

know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and

snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage

over him in only one respect. They often "came down"

handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with

gladsome looks, "My dear Scrooge, how are you?

When will you come to see me?" No beggars implored

him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him

what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all

his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of

Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to

know him; and when they saw him coming on, would

tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and

then would wag their tails as though they said, "No

eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!"

But what did Scrooge care! It was the very thing

he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths

of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance,

was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge.

Once upon a time--of all the good days in the year,

on Christmas Eve--old Scrooge sat busy in his

counting-house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy

withal: and he could hear the people in the court outside,

go wheezing up and down, beating their hands

upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the

pavement stones to warm them. The city clocks had

only just gone three, but it was quite dark already--

it had not been light all day--and candles were flaring

in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like

ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air. The fog

came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was

so dense without, that although the court was of the

narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms.

To see the dingy cloud come drooping down, obscuring

everything, one might have thought that Nature

lived hard by, and was brewing on a large scale.

The door of Scrooge's counting-house was open

that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a

dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, 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; and so surely as the

clerk came in with the shovel, the master predicted

that it would be necessary for them to part. Wherefore

the clerk put on his white comforter, and tried to

warm himself at the candle; in which effort, not being

a man of a strong imagination, he failed.

"A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" cried

a cheerful voice. 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!"

He had so heated himself with rapid walking in the

fog and frost, this nephew of Scrooge's, that he was

all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his

eyes sparkled, and his breath smoked again.

"Christmas a humbug, uncle!" said Scrooge's

nephew. "You don't mean that, I am 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 reason have you

to be morose? You're rich enough."

Scrooge having no better answer ready on the spur

of the moment, said, "Bah!" again; and followed it up

with "Humbug."

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

"What else can I be," returned the uncle, "when I

live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas!

Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas

time to you but a time for paying bills without

money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but

not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books

and having every item in 'em through a round dozen

of months presented dead against you? If I could

work my will," said Scrooge indignantly, "every idiot

who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips,

should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried

with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

"Uncle!" pleaded the nephew.

"Nephew!" returned the uncle sternly, "keep Christmas

in your own way, 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 may it do you! Much good it has ever done

you!"

"There are many things from which I might have

derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare

say," returned the nephew. "Christmas among the

rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas

time, when it has come round--apart from the

veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything

belonging to it can be apart from that--as a

good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant

time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar

of the year, when men and women seem by one consent

to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think

of people below them as if they really were

fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race

of creatures bound on other journeys. 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 in the Tank involuntarily applauded.

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! You're quite a powerful speaker,

sir," he added, turning to his nephew. "I wonder you

don't go into Parliament."

"Don't be angry, uncle. Come! Dine with us to-morrow."

Scrooge said that he would see him--yes, indeed he

did. He went the whole length of the expression,

and said that he would see him in that extremity first.

"But why?" cried Scrooge's nephew. "Why?"

"Why did you get married?" said Scrooge.

"Because I fell in love."

"Because you fell in love!" growled Scrooge, as if

that were the only one thing in the world more ridiculous

than a merry Christmas. "Good afternoon!"

"Nay, uncle, but you never came to see me before

that happened. Why give it as a reason for not

coming now?"

"Good afternoon," said Scrooge.

"I want nothing from you; I ask nothing of you;

why cannot we be friends?"

"Good afternoon," said Scrooge.

"I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so

resolute. We have never had any quarrel, to which I

have been a party. But I have made the trial in

homage to Christmas, and I'll keep my Christmas

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

"Good afternoon!" said Scrooge.

"And A Happy New Year!"

"Good afternoon!" said Scrooge.

His nephew left the room without an angry word,

notwithstanding. He 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, with fifteen shillings a

week, and a wife and family, talking about a merry

Christmas. I'll retire to Bedlam."

This lunatic, 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. They had books and papers in

their hands, and bowed to him.

"Scrooge and Marley's, I believe," said one of the

gentlemen, referring to his list. "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."

"We have no doubt his liberality is well represented

by his surviving partner," said the gentleman, presenting

his credentials.

It certainly was; for they had been two kindred

spirits. At the ominous word "liberality," Scrooge

frowned, and shook his head, and handed the credentials

back.

"At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge,"

said the gentleman, taking up a pen, "it is more than

usually desirable that we should make some slight

provision for the Poor and destitute, who suffer

greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in

want of common necessaries; hundreds of thousands

are in want of common comforts, sir."

"Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.

"Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying down

the pen again.

"And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge.

"Are they still in operation?"

"They are. Still," returned the gentleman, "I wish

I could say they were not."

"The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour,

then?" said Scrooge.

"Both very busy, sir."

"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."

"Under the impression that they scarcely furnish

Christian cheer of mind or body to the multitude,"

returned the gentleman, "a few of us are endeavouring

to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink,

and means of warmth. We choose this time, because

it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt,

and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down

for?"

"Nothing!" Scrooge replied.

"You wish to be 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 can't go there; and many would rather die."

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had

better do it, and decrease the surplus population.

Besides--excuse me--I don't know that."

"But you might know it," observed the gentleman.

"It's not my business," Scrooge returned. "It's

enough for a man to understand his own business, and

not to interfere with other people's. Mine occupies

me constantly. Good afternoon, gentlemen!"

Seeing clearly that it would be useless to pursue

their point, the gentlemen withdrew. Scrooge resumed

his labours with an improved opinion of himself,

and in a more facetious temper than was usual

with him.

Meanwhile the fog and darkness thickened so, that

people ran about with flaring links, proffering their

services to go before horses in carriages, and conduct

them on their way. The ancient tower of a church,

whose gruff old bell was always peeping slily down

at Scrooge out of a Gothic window in the wall, became

invisible, and struck the hours and quarters in the

clouds, with tremulous vibrations afterwards as if

its teeth were chattering in its frozen head up there.

The cold became intense. In the main street, at the

corner of the court, some labourers were repairing

the gas-pipes, and had lighted a great fire in a brazier,

round which a party of ragged men and boys were

gathered: warming their hands and winking their

eyes before the blaze in rapture. The water-plug

being left in solitude, its overflowings sullenly congealed,

and turned to misanthropic ice. The brightness

of the shops where holly sprigs and berries

crackled in the lamp heat of the windows, made pale

faces ruddy as they passed. Poulterers' and grocers'

trades became a splendid joke: a glorious pageant,

with which it was next to impossible to believe that

such dull principles as bargain and sale had anything

to do. The Lord Mayor, in the stronghold of the

mighty Mansion House, gave orders to his fifty cooks

and butlers to keep Christmas as a Lord Mayor's

household should; and even the little tailor, whom he

had fined five shillings on the previous Monday for

being drunk and bloodthirsty in the streets, stirred up

to-morrow's pudding in his garret, while his lean

wife and the baby sallied out to buy the beef.

Foggier yet, and colder. Piercing, searching, biting

cold. If the good Saint Dunstan had but nipped

the Evil Spirit's nose with a touch of such weather

as that, instead of using his familiar weapons, then

indeed he would have roared to lusty purpose. The

owner of one scant young nose, gnawed and mumbled

by the hungry cold as bones are gnawed by dogs,

stooped down at Scrooge's keyhole to regale him with

a Christmas carol: but at the first sound of

"God bless you, merry gentleman!

May nothing you dismay!"

Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action,

that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to

the fog and even more congenial frost.

At length the hour of shutting up the counting-house

arrived. With an ill-will Scrooge dismounted from his

stool, and tacitly admitted the fact to the expectant

clerk in the Tank, who instantly snuffed his candle out,

and put on his hat.

"You'll want all day to-morrow, I suppose?" said

Scrooge.

"If quite convenient, sir."

"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?"

The clerk smiled faintly.

"And yet," said Scrooge, "you don't think me ill-used,

when I pay a day's wages for no work."

The clerk 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 great-coat to the chin. "But I suppose you must

have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next

morning."

The clerk promised that he would; and Scrooge

walked out with a growl. The office was closed in a

twinkling, and the clerk, with the long ends of his

white comforter dangling below his waist (for he

boasted no great-coat), went down a slide on Cornhill,

at the end of a lane of boys, twenty times, in

honour of its being Christmas Eve, and then ran home

to Camden Town as hard as he could pelt, to play

at blindman's-buff.

Scrooge took his melancholy dinner in his usual

melancholy tavern; and having read all the newspapers, and

beguiled the rest of the evening with his

banker's-book, went home to bed. He lived in

chambers which had once belonged to his deceased

partner. They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a

lowering pile of building up a yard, where it had so

little business to be, that one could scarcely help

fancying it must have run there when it was a young

house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses,

and forgotten the way out again. It was old enough

now, and dreary enough, for nobody lived in it but

Scrooge, the other rooms being all let out as offices.

The yard was so dark that even Scrooge, who knew

its every stone, was fain to grope with his hands.

The fog and frost so hung about the black old gateway

of the house, that it seemed as if the Genius of

the Weather sat in mournful meditation on the

threshold.

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 is also a fact, that Scrooge had

seen it, night and morning, during his whole residence

in that place; also that Scrooge had as little of what

is called fancy about him as any man in the city of

London, even including--which is a bold word--the

corporation, aldermen, and livery. Let it also be

borne in mind that Scrooge had not bestowed one

thought on Marley, since his last mention of his

seven years' 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, without its undergoing any intermediate

process of change--not a knocker, but Marley's face.

Marley's face. It was not in impenetrable shadow

as the other objects in the yard were, but had a

dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark

cellar. It was not angry or ferocious, but looked

at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly

spectacles turned up on its ghostly forehead. The

hair was curiously stirred, as if by breath or hot air;

and, though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly

motionless. That, and its livid colour, made it

horrible; but its horror seemed to be in spite of the

face and beyond its control, rather than a part of

its own expression.

As Scrooge looked fixedly at this phenomenon, it

was a knocker again.

To say that he was not startled, or that his blood

was not conscious of a terrible sensation to which it

had been a stranger from infancy, would be untrue.

But he put his hand upon the key he had relinquished,

turned it sturdily, walked in, and lighted his candle.

He did pause, with a moment's irresolution, before

he shut the door; and he did look cautiously behind

it first, as if he half expected to be terrified with the

sight of Marley's pigtail sticking out into the hall.

But there was nothing on the back of the door, except

the screws and nuts that held the knocker on, so he

said "Pooh, pooh!" and closed it with a bang.

The sound resounded through the house like thunder.

Every room above, and every cask in the wine-merchant's

cellars below, appeared to have a separate peal

of echoes of its own. Scrooge was not a man to

be frightened by echoes. He fastened the door, and

walked across the hall, and up the stairs; slowly too:

trimming his candle as he went.

You may talk vaguely about driving a coach-and-six

up a good old flight of stairs, or through a bad

young Act of Parliament; but I mean to say you

might have got a hearse up that staircase, and taken

it broadwise, with the splinter-bar towards the wall

and the door towards the balustrades: and done it

easy. There was plenty of width for that, and room

to spare; which is perhaps the reason why Scrooge

thought he saw a locomotive hearse going on before

him in the gloom. Half-a-dozen gas-lamps out of

the street wouldn't have lighted the entry too well,

so you may suppose that it was pretty dark with

Scrooge's dip.

Up Scrooge went, not caring a button for that.

Darkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it. But before

he shut his heavy door, he walked through his rooms

to see that all was right. He had just enough recollection

of the face to desire to do that.

Sitting-room, bedroom, lumber-room. All as they

should be. Nobody under the table, nobody under

the sofa; a small fire in the grate; spoon and basin

ready; and the little saucepan of gruel (Scrooge had

a cold in his head) upon the hob. Nobody under the

bed; nobody in the closet; nobody in his dressing-gown,

which was hanging up in a suspicious attitude

against the wall. Lumber-room as usual. Old fire-guard,

old shoes, two fish-baskets, washing-stand on three

legs, and a poker.

Quite satisfied, he closed his door, and locked

himself in; double-locked himself in, which was not his

custom. Thus secured against surprise, he took off

his cravat; put on his dressing-gown and slippers, and

his nightcap; and sat down before the fire to take

his gruel.

It was a very low fire indeed; nothing on such a

bitter night. He was obliged to sit close to it, and

brood over it, before he could extract the least

sensation of warmth from such a handful of fuel.

The fireplace was an old one, built by some Dutch

merchant long ago, and paved all round with quaint

Dutch tiles, designed to illustrate the Scriptures.

There were Cains and Abels, Pharaoh's daughters;

Queens of Sheba, Angelic messengers descending

through the air on clouds like feather-beds, Abrahams,

Belshazzars, Apostles putting off to sea in butter-boats,

hundreds of figures to attract his thoughts;

and yet that face of Marley, seven years dead, came

like the ancient Prophet's rod, and swallowed up the

whole. If each smooth tile had been a blank at first,

with power to shape some picture on its surface from

the disjointed fragments of his thoughts, there would

have been a copy of old Marley's head on every one.

"Humbug!" said Scrooge; and walked across the

room.

After several turns, he sat down again. 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, and communicated for some purpose now forgotten

with a chamber in the highest story of the

building. It was with great astonishment, and with

a strange, inexplicable 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 half a minute, or 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 over the casks in the

wine-merchant's 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 his door.

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

His colour changed though, when, without a pause,

it came on through the heavy door, and passed into

the room before his eyes. Upon its coming in, the

dying flame leaped up, as though it cried, "I know

him; Marley's Ghost!" and fell again.

The same face: the very same. Marley in his pigtail,

usual waistcoat, tights and boots; the tassels on

the latter bristling, like his pigtail, and his coat-skirts,

and the hair upon his head. The chain he drew was

clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound

about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge

observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks,

ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.

His body was transparent; so that Scrooge, observing him,

and looking through his waistcoat, could see

the two buttons on his coat behind.

Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no

bowels, but he had never believed it until now.

No, nor did he believe it even now. Though he

looked the phantom through and through, and saw

it standing before him; though he felt the chilling

influence of its death-cold eyes; and marked the very

texture of the folded kerchief bound about its head

and chin, which wrapper he had not observed before;

he was still incredulous, and fought against his senses.

"How now!" said Scrooge, caustic and cold as ever.

"What do you want with me?"

"Much!"--Marley's voice, no doubt about it.

"Who are you?"

"Ask me who I was."

"Who were you then?" said Scrooge, raising his

voice. "You're particular, for a shade." He was going

to say "to a shade," but substituted this, as more

appropriate.

"In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley."

"Can you--can you sit down?" asked Scrooge, looking

doubtfully at him.

"I can."

"Do it, then."

Scrooge asked the question, because he didn't know

whether a ghost so transparent might find himself in

a condition to take a chair; and felt that in the event

of its being impossible, it might involve the necessity

of an embarrassing explanation. But the ghost sat

down on the opposite side of the fireplace, as if he

were quite used to it.

"You don't believe in me," observed the Ghost.

"I don't," said Scrooge.

"What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of

your senses?"

"I don't know," said Scrooge.

"Why do you doubt your senses?"

"Because," said Scrooge, "a little thing affects them.

A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may

be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of

cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of

gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"

Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking

jokes, nor did he feel, in his heart, by any means

waggish then. The truth is, that he tried to be

smart, as a means of distracting his own attention,

and keeping down his terror; for the spectre's voice

disturbed the very marrow in his bones.

To sit, staring at those fixed glazed eyes, in silence

for a moment, would play, Scrooge felt, the very

deuce with him. There was something very awful,

too, in the spectre's being provided with an infernal

atmosphere of its own. Scrooge could not feel it

himself, but this was clearly the case; for though the

Ghost sat perfectly motionless, its hair, and skirts,

and tassels, were still agitated as by the hot vapour

from an oven.

"You see this toothpick?" said Scrooge, returning

quickly to the charge, for the reason just assigned;

and wishing, though it were only for a second, to

divert the vision's stony gaze from himself.

"I do," replied the Ghost.

"You are not looking at it," said Scrooge.

"But I see it," said the Ghost, "notwithstanding."

"Well!" returned Scrooge, "I have but to swallow

this, and be for the rest of my days persecuted by a

legion of goblins, all of my own creation. Humbug,

I tell you! humbug!"

At this the spirit raised a frightful cry, and shook

its chain with such a dismal and appalling noise, that

Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself

from falling in a swoon. But how much greater was

his horror, when the phantom taking off the bandage

round its head, as if it were too warm to wear indoors,

its lower jaw dropped down upon its breast!

Scrooge fell upon his knees, and clasped his hands

before his face.

"Mercy!" he said. "Dreadful apparition, why do

you trouble me?"

"Man of the worldly mind!" replied the Ghost, "do

you believe in me or not?"

"I do," said Scrooge. "I must. But why do spirits

walk the earth, and why do they come to me?"

"It is required of every man," the Ghost returned,

"that the spirit within him should walk abroad among

his fellowmen, and travel far and wide; and if that

spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so

after death. It is doomed to wander through the

world--oh, woe is me!--and witness what it cannot

share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to

happiness!"

Again the spectre raised a cry, and shook its chain

and wrung its shadowy hands.

"You are fettered," said Scrooge, trembling. "Tell

me why?"

"I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost.

"I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded

it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I

wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?"

Scrooge trembled more and more.

"Or would you know," pursued the Ghost, "the

weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself?

It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven

Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since.

It is a ponderous chain!"

Scrooge glanced about him on the floor, in the

expectation of finding himself surrounded by some fifty

or sixty fathoms of iron cable: but he could see

nothing.

"Jacob," he said, imploringly. "Old Jacob Marley,

tell me more. Speak comfort to me, Jacob!"

"I have none to give," the Ghost replied. "It comes

from other regions, Ebenezer Scrooge, and is conveyed

by other ministers, to other kinds of men. Nor

can I tell you what I would. A very little more is

all permitted to me. I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I

cannot linger anywhere. My spirit never walked

beyond our counting-house--mark me!--in life my

spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our

money-changing hole; and weary journeys lie before

me!"

It was a habit with Scrooge, whenever he became

thoughtful, to put his hands in his breeches pockets.

Pondering on what the Ghost had said, he did so now,

but without lifting up his eyes, or getting off his

knees.

"You must have been very slow about it, Jacob,"

Scrooge observed, in a business-like manner, though

with humility and deference.

"Slow!" the Ghost repeated.

"Seven years dead," mused Scrooge. "And travelling

all the time!"

"The whole time," said the Ghost. "No rest, no

peace. Incessant torture of remorse."

"You travel fast?" said Scrooge.

"On the wings of the wind," replied the Ghost.

"You might have got over a great quantity of

ground in seven years," said Scrooge.

The Ghost, on hearing this, set up another cry, and

clanked its chain so hideously in the dead silence of

the night, that the Ward would have been justified in

indicting it for a nuisance.

"Oh! captive, bound, and double-ironed," cried the

phantom, "not to know, that ages of incessant labour

by immortal creatures, for this earth must pass into

eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is

all developed. Not to know that any Christian spirit

working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may

be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast

means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of

regret can make amends for one life's opportunity

misused! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!"

"But you were always a good man of business,

Jacob," faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this

to himself.

"Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands

again. "Mankind was my business. The common

welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance,

and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings

of my trade were but a drop of water in the

comprehensive ocean of my business!"

It held up its chain at arm's length, as if that were

the cause of all its unavailing grief, and flung it

heavily upon the ground again.

"At this time of the rolling year," the spectre said,

"I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of

fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never

raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise

Men to a poor abode! Were there no poor homes to

which its light would have conducted me!"

Scrooge was very much dismayed to hear the

spectre going on at this rate, and began to quake

exceedingly.

"Hear me!" cried the Ghost. "My time is nearly

gone."

"I will," said Scrooge. "But don't be hard upon

me! Don't be flowery, Jacob! Pray!"

"How it is that I appear before you in a shape that

you can see, I may not tell. I have sat invisible

beside you many and many a day."

It was not an agreeable idea. Scrooge shivered,

and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"That is no light part of my penance," pursued

the Ghost. "I am here to-night to warn you, that you

have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate. A

chance and hope of my procuring, Ebenezer."

"You were always a good friend to me," said

Scrooge. "Thank'ee!"

"You will be haunted," resumed the Ghost, "by

Three Spirits."

Scrooge's countenance fell almost as low as the

Ghost's had done.

"Is that the chance and hope you mentioned,

Jacob?" he demanded, in a faltering voice.

"It is."

"I--I think I'd rather not," said Scrooge.

"Without their visits," said the Ghost, "you cannot

hope to shun the path I tread. Expect the first to-morrow,

when the bell tolls One."

"Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it over,

Jacob?" hinted Scrooge.

"Expect the second on the next night at the same

hour. The third upon the next night when the last

stroke of Twelve has ceased to vibrate. Look to see

me no more; and look that, for your own sake, you

remember what has passed between us!"

When it had said these words, the spectre took its

wrapper from the table, and bound it round its head,

as before. Scrooge knew this, by the smart sound its

teeth made, when the jaws were brought together

by the bandage. He ventured to raise his eyes again,

and found his supernatural visitor confronting him

in an erect attitude, with its chain wound over and

about its arm.

The apparition walked backward from him; and at

every step it took, the window raised itself a little,

so that when the spectre reached it, it was wide open.

It beckoned Scrooge to approach, which he did.

When they were within two paces of each other,

Marley's Ghost held up its hand, warning him to

come no nearer. Scrooge stopped.

Not so much in obedience, as in surprise and fear:

for on the raising of the hand, he became sensible

of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of

lamentation and regret; wailings inexpressibly sorrowful and

self-accusatory. The spectre, after listening for a moment,

joined in the mournful dirge; and floated out upon the

bleak, dark night.

Scrooge followed to the window: desperate in his

curiosity. He looked out.

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither

and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they

went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's

Ghost; some few (they might be guilty governments)

were linked together; none were free. Many had

been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He

had been quite familiar with one old ghost, in a white

waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to

its ankle, who cried piteously at being unable to assist

a wretched woman with an infant, whom it saw below,

upon a door-step. The misery with them all was,

clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in

human matters, and had lost the power for ever.

Whether these creatures faded into mist, or mist

enshrouded them, he could not tell. But they and

their spirit voices faded together; and the night became

as it had been when he walked home.

Scrooge closed the window, and examined the door

by which the Ghost had entered. It was double-locked,

as he had locked it with his own hands, and

the bolts were undisturbed. He tried to say "Humbug!"

but stopped at the first syllable. And being,

from the emotion he had undergone, or the fatigues

of the day, or his glimpse of the Invisible World, or

the dull conversation of the Ghost, or the lateness of

the hour, much in need of repose; went straight to

bed, without undressing, and fell asleep upon the

instant.