A clock tower lit up at night

Description automatically generated

"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.

STAVE II: THE FIRST OF THE THREE SPIRITS

WHEN Scrooge awoke, it was so dark, that looking out of bed,

he could scarcely distinguish the transparent window from

the opaque walls of his chamber. He was endeavouring to

pierce the darkness with his ferret eyes, when the chimes of a

neighbouring church struck the four quarters. So he listened

for the hour.

To his great astonishment the heavy bell went on from

six to seven, and from seven to eight, and regularly up to

twelve; then stopped. Twelve! It was past two when he

went to bed. The clock was wrong. An icicle must have

got into the works. Twelve!

He touched the spring of his repeater, to correct this most

preposterous clock. Its rapid little pulse beat twelve:

and stopped.

"Why, it isn't possible," said Scrooge, "that I can have

slept through a whole day and far into another night. It

isn't possible that anything has happened to the sun, and

this is twelve at noon!"

The idea being an alarming one, he scrambled out of bed,

and groped his way to the window. He was obliged to rub

the frost off with the sleeve of his dressing-gown before he

could see anything; and could see very little then. All he

could make out was, that it was still very foggy and extremely

cold, and that there was no noise of people running to and fro,

and making a great stir, as there unquestionably would have been

if night had beaten off bright day, and taken possession of the

world. This was a great relief, because "three days after sight

of this First of Exchange pay to Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge or his

order," and so forth, would have become a mere United States'

security if there were no days to count by.

Scrooge went to bed again, and thought, and thought, and thought

it over and over and over, and could make nothing of it. The more he

thought, the more perplexed he was; and the more he endeavoured

not to think, the more he thought.

Marley's Ghost bothered him exceedingly. Every time he resolved

within himself, after mature inquiry, that it was all a dream, his

mind flew back again, like a strong spring released, to its first

position, and presented the same problem to be worked all through,

"Was it a dream or not?"

Scrooge lay in this state until the chime had gone three quarters

more, when he remembered, on a sudden, that the Ghost had warned

him of a visitation when the bell tolled one. He resolved to lie

awake until the hour was passed; and, considering that he could

no more go to sleep than go to Heaven, this was perhaps the

wisest resolution in his power.

The quarter was so long, that he was more than once convinced he

must have sunk into a doze unconsciously, and missed the clock.

At length it broke upon his listening ear.

"Ding, dong!"

"A quarter past," said Scrooge, counting.

"Ding, dong!"

"Half-past!" said Scrooge.

"Ding, dong!"

"A quarter to it," said Scrooge.

"Ding, dong!"

"The hour itself," said Scrooge, triumphantly, "and nothing else!"

He spoke before the hour bell sounded, which it now did with a

deep, dull, hollow, melancholy ONE. Light flashed up in the room

upon the instant, and the curtains of his bed were drawn.

The curtains of his bed were drawn aside, I tell you, by a

hand. Not the curtains at his feet, nor the curtains at his

back, but those to which his face was addressed. The curtains

of his bed were drawn aside; and Scrooge, starting up into a

half-recumbent attitude, found himself face to face with the

unearthly visitor who drew them: as close to it as I am now

to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow.

It was a strange figure--like a child: yet not so like a

child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural

medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded

from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions.

Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was

white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in

it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. The arms were

very long and muscular; the hands the same, as if its hold

were of uncommon strength. Its legs and feet, most delicately

formed, were, like those upper members, bare. It wore a tunic

of the purest white; and round its waist was bound

a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It held

a branch of fresh green holly in its hand; and, in singular

contradiction of that wintry emblem, had its dress trimmed

with summer flowers. But the strangest thing about it was,

that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear

jet of light, by which all this was visible; and which was

doubtless the occasion of its using, in its duller moments, a

great extinguisher for a cap, which it now held under its arm.

Even this, though, when Scrooge looked at it with increasing

steadiness, was not its strangest quality. For as its belt

sparkled and glittered now in one part and now in another,

and what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so

the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness: being now a

thing with one arm, now with one leg, now with twenty legs,

now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a

body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible

in the dense gloom wherein they melted away. And in the

very wonder of this, it would be itself again; distinct and

clear as ever.

"Are you the Spirit, sir, whose coming was foretold to

me?" asked Scrooge.

"I am!"

The voice was soft and gentle. Singularly low, as if

instead of being so close beside him, it were at a distance.

"Who, and what are you?" Scrooge demanded.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past."

"Long Past?" inquired Scrooge: observant of its dwarfish

stature.

"No. Your past."

Perhaps, Scrooge could not have told anybody why, if

anybody could have asked him; but he had a special desire

to see the Spirit in his cap; and begged him to be covered.

"What!" exclaimed the Ghost, "would you so soon put out,

with worldly hands, the light I give? Is it not enough

that you are one of those whose passions made this cap, and

force me through whole trains of years to wear it low upon

my brow!"

Scrooge reverently disclaimed all intention to offend

or any knowledge of having wilfully "bonneted" the Spirit at

any period of his life. He then made bold to inquire what

business brought him there.

"Your welfare!" said the Ghost.

Scrooge expressed himself much obliged, but could not

help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been

more conducive to that end. The Spirit must have heard

him thinking, for it said immediately:

"Your reclamation, then. Take heed!"

It put out its strong hand as it spoke, and clasped him

gently by the arm.

"Rise! and walk with me!"

It would have been in vain for Scrooge to plead that the

weather and the hour were not adapted to pedestrian purposes;

that bed was warm, and the thermometer a long way below

freezing; that he was clad but lightly in his slippers,

dressing-gown, and nightcap; and that he had a cold upon him at

that time. The grasp, though gentle as a woman's hand,

was not to be resisted. He rose: but finding that the Spirit

made towards the window, clasped his robe in supplication.

"I am a mortal," Scrooge remonstrated, "and liable to fall."

"Bear but a touch of my hand there," said the Spirit,

laying it upon his heart, "and you shall be upheld in more

than this!"

As the words were spoken, they passed through the wall,

and stood upon an open country road, with fields on either

hand. The city had entirely vanished. Not a vestige of it

was to be seen. The darkness and the mist had vanished

with it, for it was a clear, cold, winter day, with snow upon

the ground.

"Good Heaven!" said Scrooge, clasping his hands together,

as he looked about him. "I was bred in this place. I was

a boy here!"

The Spirit gazed upon him mildly. Its gentle touch,

though it had been light and instantaneous, appeared still

present to the old man's sense of feeling. He was conscious

of a thousand odours floating in the air, each one connected

with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares

long, long, forgotten!

"Your lip is trembling," said the Ghost. "And what is

that upon your cheek?"

Scrooge muttered, with an unusual catching in his voice,

that it was a pimple; and begged the Ghost to lead him

where he would.

"You recollect the way?" inquired the Spirit.

"Remember it!" cried Scrooge with fervour; "I could

walk it blindfold."

"Strange to have forgotten it for so many years!" observed

the Ghost. "Let us go on."

They walked along the road, Scrooge recognising every

gate, and post, and tree; until a little market-town appeared

in the distance, with its bridge, its church, and winding river.

Some shaggy ponies now were seen trotting towards them

with boys upon their backs, who called to other boys in

country gigs and carts, driven by farmers. All these boys

were in great spirits, and shouted to each other, until the

broad fields were so full of merry music, that the crisp air

laughed to hear it!

"These are but shadows of the things that have been," said

the Ghost. "They have no consciousness of us."

The jocund travellers came on; and as they came, Scrooge

knew and named them every one. Why was he rejoiced beyond

all bounds to see them! Why did his cold eye glisten, and

his heart leap up as they went past! Why was he filled

with gladness when he heard them give each other Merry

Christmas, as they parted at cross-roads and bye-ways, for

their several homes! What was merry Christmas to Scrooge?

Out upon merry Christmas! What good had it ever done

to him?

"The school is not quite deserted," said the Ghost. "A

solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still."

Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed.

They left the high-road, by a well-remembered lane, and

soon approached a mansion of dull red brick, with a little

weathercock-surmounted cupola, on the roof, and a bell

hanging in it. It was a large house, but one of broken

fortunes; for the spacious offices were little used, their walls

were damp and mossy, their windows broken, and their

gates decayed. Fowls clucked and strutted in the stables;

and the coach-houses and sheds were over-run with grass.

Nor was it more retentive of its ancient state, within; for

entering the dreary hall, and glancing through the open

doors of many rooms, they found them poorly furnished,

cold, and vast. There was an earthy savour in the air, a

chilly bareness in the place, which associated itself somehow

with too much getting up by candle-light, and not too

much to eat.

They went, the Ghost and Scrooge, across the hall, to a

door at the back of the house. It opened before them, and

disclosed a long, bare, melancholy room, made barer still by

lines of plain deal forms and desks. At one of these a lonely

boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down

upon a form, and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he

used to be.

Not a latent echo in the house, not a squeak and scuffle

from the mice behind the panelling, not a drip from the

half-thawed water-spout in the dull yard behind, not a sigh among

the leafless boughs of one despondent poplar, not the idle

swinging of an empty store-house door, no, not a clicking in

the fire, but fell upon the heart of Scrooge with a softening

influence, and gave a freer passage to his tears.