

Business on Christmas Eve



Marley is dead, dead as a doornail. There is no doubt about it, because years ago, on a Christmas eve much like this one, the register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the undertaker, and the chief mourner who's name was Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge was his sole friend. Even so, he was not dreadfully broken up by the death, except that he had lost an excellent business partner. On the very day of the funeral, Scrooge, the executor of the will, solemnized the closing of Marley's books as an undoubted bargain, in fact, a windfall for himself.

As uncaring as the surviving partner was, Scrooge never removed Marley's name from the business sign. There it stood above the office door: *Scrooge and Marley*. Sometimes people new to the business would call Scrooge *Scrooge*, and sometimes they would call him *Marley*, but Scrooge answered to both names. It was all the same to him, for he was a tight-fisted, squeezing, grasping, clutching, money grubbing, greedy, frozen old fart! His cold shrunken heart made his skin pale, his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and his hair frosty white. He even lived in low temperatures by keeping his office as cold as an icebox throughout the fall and winter, and did not

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thaw it one degree at Christmas time. External heat and cold had little influence on this man. No wind blows colder than the breath of his shrewd bitter voice.

When walking down the street, he walked at a brisk pace, head down, never looking up at people's faces. Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, "Scrooge, how are you today? Let's have lunch sometime." No beggars put out a hand to him, no children asked him the time of day, no man or woman ever once inquired the way to such and such a place. Even the blind man's dog seemed to know him, and when the dog saw him coming, he tugged his owner aside as if to say, "Stay out of the way of the evil eye." But what did Scrooge care? He preferred having his own way along the crowded path of life, he wanted all human sympathy to keep its distance.

§

Once upon a time, on what should have been a wonderful day for Scrooge, on Christmas Eve no less, he was busy in his office counting numbers. Outside was cold and bleak. The City clocks had only past four, but it was quite dark already because fog had rolled in so thick that the opposite buildings were mere phantoms. To see the dingy haze obscuring everything, one might have thought nature was brewing a mysterious potion on a monumental scale.

Then, in bright contrast to the outside, came a hearty, "Merry Christmas! God bless you!" It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew.

Startled, Scrooge said, "Bah! Humbug!"

His nephew had so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost, he was all aglow, his face handsome,

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his eyes sparkling. "Christmas a humbug? Surely you don't mean it?"

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

"Well then," returned the nephew with a chuckle, "What reason have you to be miserable? You're rich."

Scrooge, having no better answer, again said, "Bah Humbug!"

"Why be cross?"

"What else can I be when I live in a world of fools? What is Christmas to you but a time for buying gifts on credit when you have no money? You are another year older, and not one hour richer."

"There are many things in this world from which I have derived good, but not profited," replied the nephew, "Christmas being one of them."

"Keep Christmas your own way," his uncle said, "and let me keep it my way."

"Keep it? But you don't keep it. I have always thought of Christmas time—along with the veneration due to its sacred name and origin—as a good time for giving, a time to be charitable. It is a pleasant time for family and fun. The only time of the year when men and women seem to open their hearts and give good cheer to all. And therefore uncle, though it has never put a dollar in my pocket, I believe Christmas is good, and will do good for me; and I say, God bless it!"

The clerk, at the desk near the door, applauded.

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

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The clerk went silent, head back down to his work.

“Uncle Ebenezer,” pleaded the nephew.

Facing his nephew, “Fred, if I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips would be boiled with his own Christmas gravy, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart!”

“Don't be angry, uncle. Come! Dine with me, my wife and our friends and family tomorrow.”

“But why?” questioned Scrooge.

“But why? Why what?”

“Why on earth did you marry so young? So poor?”

“Because I fell in love.”

“Because you fell in love!” growled Scrooge with sarcasm as thick as pea soup, as if that were the only thing in the world more ridiculous than a Merry Christmas.

“But uncle, you never came to see me before I married. Why give it as a reason for not coming now?”

“Good afternoon to you!,” said Scrooge.

“Ebenezer, I want nothing from you, I ask nothing of you. Why can't we be friends?”

“Good afternoon.”

“I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute. However I'll keep my Christmas humor to the last.” With a silly grin, he said, “A Merry Christmas uncle!”

“Good afternoon!”

“And A Happy New Year!”

His nephew took leave without an angry word. Stopping at the outer door, he bestowed the Seasons

Greetings on the clerk, who, cold as he was, in this freezer of an office, was warmer than Scrooge; for he returned the greeting cordially.

"I'll be damned," muttered Scrooge. "There's another fool, my clerk. Barely enough to live on, and yet he has a wife and kids, and is talking about a Merry Christmas."

This lunatic of a clerk, on letting Scrooge's nephew out, had let two other people in. They were portly gentlemen, pleasant to behold, and now standing with their hats off in Scrooge's office. They had books and papers in their hands, and bowed to him.

One of the gentlemen, referring to his list, says, "I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley?"

"Mr. Marley died seven years ago this very night," Scrooge replied.

"On Christmas Eve. Sorry to hear that," said the gentleman as he handed Scrooge a pamphlet titled, *Help the Poor, Help the Children, Help This Christmas Season*.

On the word *Help*, Scrooge frowned and shook his head. On the word *Christmas*, he handed the pamphlet back.

"During this festive season, Mr. Scrooge," said the gentleman, "it is more than usual that we should be charitable to the poor and destitute children who suffer greatly. Many are in want of common necessities, thousands are in want of common comforts."

"Is there government welfare?" demanded Scrooge. "Is it still operational?"

"Yes," returned the gentleman, "I wish it was not

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necessary.”

“And are there no orphanages?”

“Plenty.”

“Is there still Juvenile Hall for kids that go bad?”

“Yes, that cold jail for children still exists.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” said Scrooge. “I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their usefulness.”

Looking doubtful the fat fellow continued, “In the Christian cheer of mind, a few of us are endeavoring to raise a fund to buy the poor some groceries and toys for poor and destitute children. We choose this time because it is a time when people are kind to their fellow man. What shall I put you down for?”

“Nothing!” said Scrooge. “I don't rejoice at Christmas, and I don't care to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned. They cost enough through taxes.”

“It's never enough and many suffer, some die.”

“What of it if they die? Better to decrease the surplus population.”

“But sir, certainly you don't mean that?”

“Good afternoon!” concluded Scrooge.

Seeing clearly that it would be useless to pursue their point, the gentlemen withdrew.

Having swiftly ended a fruitless transaction, Scrooge resumed his labors with an improved opinion of himself. Meanwhile, the foggy darkness thickened, cars put their headlights on, and street lights came on early.

The outside may have been frigid, however the hearts of a little group of children were warm as they walked the streets singing Christmas carols. On hearing their song, Scrooge's clerk went to the door and opened it. But at the first sound of, "God bless you, Merry Gentlemen, may nothing you dismay!" Scrooge seized the door, and slammed it shut with such energy, the singers fled in terror.

The office remained quiet after that. The clerk dared not move, and at length the hour of closing arrived. With an ill will Scrooge stood up, and tacitly admitted this fact to the expectant clerk who instantly jumped up and put on his coat to leave.

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

"Yes sir."

"It's not fair to me as an employer to pay, and the employee not to work."

The clerk smiled faintly, "It is only once a year."

"It is a poor excuse. But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here early the next morning."

The clerk promised he would, and Scrooge walked off with a growl. The office was now closed for the evening, and closed for the twenty-fifth of December.

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Marley's Ghost



Scrooge took his dinner in his usual melancholy restaurant. After reading the newspapers he went home to his house in which he had partitioned off an apartment. The rest was rented out as offices, now empty because of the holidays.

The fog and frost hung about the black doorway in such a way that the large door knocker seemed as if to sit in mournful meditation. After putting his key in the lock, he jerked his hand back and stood frozen as the knocker changed into its previous owner's deceased face, Marley's face. It was the burning red color of a lobster being boiled to death. Without malice, the face simply stared at Scrooge with ghostly spectacles turned up on its ghostly forehead, the eyes open, motionlessly dead. As Scrooge stared wide-eyed at this phenomenon, it was a knocker again. To say he was not startled, or that his blood did not curdle, would be untrue.

He returned his shaking hand to the key, turned it, walked in, and shut the door with a bang. The sound resonated as loud as thunder, every office having a hollow echo of its own. This brought Scrooge back to his senses. He chuckled to himself, he was not a man to be

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frightened by echoes.

In the darkness he switched on the entryway's low energy light. It was only a dim light in this wide, high space. He paused with a moment's irresolution, checked the time on the grandfather clock, the sole piece of furniture in the hall, and said, "Whatever!" He walked to the stairs and started up. Below him, Scrooge thought he saw a ghostly hearse roll silently by in the gloom. His steps quickened. Not caring for phantoms, he said aloud to himself, "Darkness is cheap, and I like cheap."

Sufficiently unsettled by the afore mentioned events, Scrooge uncharacteristically turned on all the lights in his bedroom and gave it a thorough inspection to make sure all was right—nobody under the bed, no monsters in the closet. Reassured, he closed the door and locked himself in, then double-locked himself in which was not his usual custom. Thus secured against surprise, he took off his business suit, put on his pajamas, robe, and slippers. Rather than turn up the heat, he wrapped himself in a blanket, and sat down to read a magazine.

Despite his interest in the article on money counting, his thoughts returned to the face of Marley on the door and the fact that this is the anniversary of his death. "Humbug!" said Scrooge. But it was not enough to settle his mind so he got up and walked several turns around the room before sitting down again. As he threw his head back in the chair, his glance happened to rest upon a bell for calling a family to dinner. As no family had lived in this house for a generation, the bell sat tarnished and unused. To his great astonishment and dread, the bell began to swing. It swung softly at the outset scarcely making a sound, but soon it rang out loudly. Then the

grandfather clock in the entry hall below, Marley's clock, rang and chimed in unison. Though this may have lasted but half a minute, it seemed an hour before the bells and chimes ceased abruptly as they had begun.

What followed was more unsettling. There came a clanking noise, deep down below, as if someone were dragging a heavy chain over the wooden steps from the cellar toward the kitchen. Scrooge shuddered upon remembering to have heard that ghosts in haunted houses were described as dragging chains. The cellar door flew open with a booming sound, then he heard the noise much louder on the floor below; then coming up the stairs, then coming straight toward his room.

Scrooge turned his chair to face the door. "It's humbug! I won't believe it." Believe it or not, his color changed, when a figure came floating through the heavy door, passing into the room before his eyes. Upon coming in, Scrooge recognized the face, it was Marley's Ghost!

Marley was in his usual business suit and shoes with a chain clasped about his belly. It was long and wound about him as a snake around its prey. Attached to the end, Scrooge observed a cash-box, laptop, ledgers, deeds, and other instruments and documents of the Ghost's former business. His body was transparent, the wall behind visible through his ghostly apparition.

Scrooge felt a chill from the dead frozen eyes of the phantom before him. His senses made no sense. "How now?" said Scrooge, caustic and cold as ever. "What do you want with me?"

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

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“Who are you?”

“Ask me who I was.”

“Who were you then?” said Scrooge, raising his voice. “You're particular, for a ghost.”

“In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley.”

“Can you—can you sit down?” asked Scrooge, looking doubtfully at him. Scrooge asked the question because he didn't know whether a transparent ghost was of a condition to take a chair, and felt in the event of it being impossible, might involve the necessity of an embarrassing explanation. One does not want to embarrass a dead friend's ghost.

“I can,” it replied.

“Then do it.”

The Ghost sat down on the opposite chair as if he were quite used to it.

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

“No I don't,” said Scrooge.

“What evidence would you have of my reality beyond your own senses?”

“I don't know.”

“Why do you doubt your senses?”

“Because,” said Scrooge, “You may be an undigested bit of beef, a slice of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. Whatever you are! There's more gravy than of grave about you.”

Scrooge was not in the habit of cracking jokes. The truth is, he was trying to be a smart ass as a means of distracting his own attention to keep down his terror; for

the specter's voice disturbed him to the bone. The Ghost was spooky, it glowed in an unnatural light, its hair and clothes were agitated as if it was made of hot vapor from an oven.

“You see this magazine?” said Scrooge, taking charge of the situation.

“I do.”

“You're not even looking at it,” said Scrooge.

“But I see it just the same,” said the Ghost.

“What nonsense. Humbug, I tell you, humbug!”

At this the spirit moaned, dropped its chain on its knees, and began removing a handkerchief bound about its head and chin. The lower jaw dropped down upon its breast with a grisly crackle and crunch, causing it to raise a frightful cry. It grabbed and shook its chain, then threw it to the floor with a most appalling, thunderous noise.

Standing, Marley's Ghost screamed, “Now do you believe in me or not?”

The full power of this ghastly phantasm fell upon Scrooge. He snapped, clasping his hands before his face, pleading, “I do. Have mercy! But why do spirits walk the earth?”

“It is required of every man, that the spirit within him should walk abroad, to travel far and wide witnessing the acts of human kind. If that spirit had not gone forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander the world—oh, woe is me!—and witness what it cannot affect.” Again the specter raised a cry, shook its chain, and wrung its shadowy hands.

“Why are you shackled?” asked Scrooge, trembling,

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“Why?”

“I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, item by item. It has taken away my own free will, and of my own freewill I wear it. Do the length and items appear strange to you?”

An irrepressible tremor gradually invaded his body, shaking his mind, shuddering his senses. He trembled, for Scrooge saw the items of his business weighing down the Ghost, holding it to this earthly realm, unable to pass beyond. Would it be the same for him?

“Do you know the weight and length of your own spiritual hindrance? Seven Christmas eves since it was as heavy and as long as this, and you have continued to labor on, ever extending its ponderous length.”

Scrooge glanced about him in the expectation of finding himself surrounded by chain and weights, but he saw nothing. “Jacob,” he implored, “Do you have any comfort for me?”

“For myself I have none to give,” the ghost lamented. “I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere. In life, I never roamed beyond the narrow limits of our money counting office. Now I dread the never ending journey which lies before me!”

It was a habit with Scrooge, whenever he became thoughtful, to put his hands in his pockets. He did so now, pondering what the Ghost had said.

“Ebenezer Scrooge! I have wasted a mortal life without caring, without usefulness to humankind. I wish I had known, but no amount of regret can make amends for a life's opportunities missed.”

“But you were always a good business man, Jacob,”

said Scrooge, who now began to apply himself.

“Business!” cried the Ghost. “Care and welfare should have been my business. I’ve only seen to the welfare of my own business. But kindness, charity, mercy, should have been my business!” The Ghost held up its chain at arm’s length, as if it were the cause of all its unavailing grief.

Scrooge felt Marley’s sorrow and regret.

The specter continued, “Why did I walk through the streets with my eyes turned down and never raise them? I missed the Blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode, to their salvation. Why did I not look up to see the Star which would have led me to many a poor home in need of kindness and my charity? It would have led me to my salvation. Why?”

Scrooge was very much dismayed to hear this spirit so tormented.

The Ghost said, “Hear me! My time is nearly done.”

“I will Jacob.”

“As part of my penance I had sat invisible beside you many and many a day. This evening I appear before you in a shape you can see. I am here tonight to warn you that you have a chance and hope of escaping my fate. A chance and a hope which I have procured for you, Ebenezer.”

“You were always a good friend to me,” said Scrooge. His countenance fell almost as low as the Ghost’s, “Jacob, is there really a chance and hope for me?”

“There is. You will be haunted by Three Spirits.”

“I think I’d rather not have three more spirits.”

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“Without their visits you cannot hope to shun the path I tread. Expect the first tomorrow when the bell tolls One. The second on the next night at the same hour. The third, upon the next night when the last stroke of Twelve ceases to chime.”

“Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it over?” hinted Scrooge.

“Ebenezer!” howled the Ghost.

Scrooge lowered his eyes for shame of asking.

“For your own sake, remember what has passed between us. You will see me no more.”

The specter took its handkerchief from the table and bound it round its head as before. Scrooge knew this by the grinding sound its teeth made when the jaws were brought together. He ventured to raise his eyes again and found his supernatural visitor confronting him with its chain wound around its arm.

The apparition walked backward from him, and at every step it took, the window raised itself a little; when the specter reached it, it was wide open. The ghost 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 horror, for on the raising of the hand, he became aware of confused noises in the air—incoherent sounds of lamentation of regret, wailings of inexpressible sorrow and self accusation. The specter, after listening for a moment, joined in the mournful dirge; then floated out into the bleak, cold night.

Desperate with curiosity, Scrooge followed to the

window to see the ghostly realm of spirits haunting. The air was filled with phantoms wandering restlessly, each bound by chains, none free of past misdeeds. Many had been associates of Scrooge. One old ghost, with whom he had dined in life, had a iron safe attached to its ankle. It cried sadly at being unable to assist a homeless woman upon a doorstep. The misery with them all was that they sought to interfere for the good in human matters, and had lost the power to do so, lost forever, forever lost.

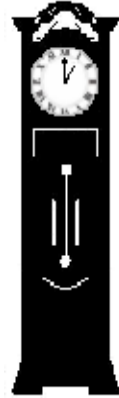
Whether these creatures faded into mist, or the mist enshrouded them, Scrooge could not tell. But they and their spirit voices faded together, and the night returned to the living.

Scrooge closed the window, and examined the door by which the Ghost had entered. It was still double locked, as he had locked it with his own hands. He tried to say, "Humbug!" but stopped at the first syllable. He felt overwhelmed by the emotions he had undergone during the ghastly conversation with the Ghost, and felt unsettled by his glimpse of the Phantom Realm.

Exhausted by the lateness of the hour, which was past 2 AM, he climbed directly into Marley's old bed, a king sized four poster that had curtains between each post. Without undressing, he closed the bed curtains, slipped under the covers, and immediately fell asleep.

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The First of the Three Spirits



It was dark when Scrooge awoke. Marley's grandfather clock began to chime the hour of six, and to his great astonishment, went on to ring seven, eight, nine, and up to twelve. Twelve noon! "How could I have slept for 10 solid hours?" The clock must be wrong, besides, there was no day light. He checked the clock next to his bed, it was not twelve noon, but twelve midnight! "I have slept through a night and day, and far into another night," said Scrooge to the darkness. "It isn't possible."

The mystery of time and Marley's ghostly conversation were troubling Scrooge exceedingly. Each time he convinced himself that it was all a dream, his mind sprang back as a released spring, with the same question, "Was it a dream or not?"

Scrooge lay there in a quandary until the chime had gone three quarters more, when he remembered Marley's Ghost had warned him of a visitation when the bell tolled. He resolved to lie awake until the hour passed.

"Ding, dong!" chimed the grandfather clock, announcing its readiness to toll the hour.

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“The hour itself is upon me,” Scrooge said triumphantly, “and nothing else!”

He had spoken before the hour bell began, which it now did with a melancholy sound. Light instantly flashed into the room, his bed curtains were yanked aside, and Scrooge found himself facing an unearthly visitor. It was an older man wearing a tunic of the purest white, and his waist was bound by a lustrous belt. But the strangest thing was the luminous light which sprung up from the crown of its head to make all things visible. Under its arm, it held the extinguisher of the light, a cap.

Bewildered, Scrooge asked, “Are you the Spirit whose coming was foretold?”

“I am,” said the Spirit in a gentle voice.

“Who and what are you?”

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.”

“Long Past?”

“No. Your past.”

Perhaps Scrooge could not have told anybody why, but he had an uncommon 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 earthly hands, the spiritual light I give?”

Scrooge disclaimed any intention to offend. He then boldly inquired, “What business brings you here?”

“Your welfare.”

Scrooge was much obliged, but could not help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end.

The Spirit seemed to hear him thinking. It said, “Your

reclamation, then. Take heed.” It extended a hand as it spoke, clasping 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 accommodating to pedestrian purposes, that his bed was warm, or that he was clad only lightly in night clothes. The grasp, though gentle as a child's hand, was not to be resisted. He rose, but finding that the Spirit made towards the window, clutched at its robe in supplication.

“I am mortal,” worried Scrooge. “I'm liable to fall.”

“Bear but the touch of my hand, and you shall travel safely.”

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They floated through the wall, the city vanished, and they alighted onto a rural village street. Here it was a clear, brisk, winter's day, with snow on the ground.

“Good Heavens!” said Scrooge, wringing his hands as he glanced about. He was conscious of a thousand odors circulating in the air, each connected with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares long ago forgotten. “I grew up in this place. I was a boy here!”

The Spirit gazed upon him knowingly, “Your lip is trembling, and what is upon your cheek?”

Scrooge muttered, with an uncharacteristic catch in his voice, that it was nothing, then begged the Ghost to lead him where he would.

“You recollect the way home?” inquired the Spirit.

“Remember it?” cried Scrooge fervently, “I can walk it blindfolded, though I have not thought of it in

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decades.”

“Strange to have forgotten it for so long,” observed the Ghost. “Let us go on.”

They walked farther, Scrooge recognizing the church, the shops, and the meandering river. Coming towards them were boys, who called to other boys with their fathers. All were in great spirits, and shouted to each other until the crisp air was full of merry, musical laughter.

Scrooge knew and named every one of them. Why did he rejoice beyond all bounds to see them? Why did his cold eyes glisten, and his heart leap as they passed? Why was he filled with gladness when he heard them exchange a “Merry Christmas?” What was Merry Christmas to Scrooge? What good had it ever done him? He turned to the Ghost.

“These are but shadows of the things past; they have no consciousness of us.” Taking them still farther, the Ghost said, “The house in front of us has a solitary child, a boy neglected by his friends.”

Scrooge sorrowfully frowned, “I know.”

The mansion was built of dull red brick with an ornate weather cock mounted on the roof. It was a largish house of broken fortunes offering spacious offices that were little used, their walls in need of paint, a broken window boarded up, and decaying doorways. His father was an inept business man during challenging times. Scrooge could see he had followed his father by partitioning his house into offices, but, it was little comfort knowing he was a better business man than his father had been.

The Ghost and Scrooge went to the back of the house

to the door of a family apartment. It opened before them disclosing a long, bare, gloomy room. At one end was a lonely boy reading a book near a dim light. Scrooge sat down upon a chair and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he once was. The scene fell upon the heart of Scrooge with softening influence, giving free passage to his pent up emotions.

The Spirit touched him on the arm and pointed to his younger self who was intent upon reading, absorbed in his book, living in his imagination. Then he pointed out the window to a beagle strolling toward a dog house.

“Why, it's Snoopy!” Scrooge exclaimed in ecstasy. “It's my dear dog Snoopy. One Christmas time, as yet an only child, I was given a dog so I would not be alone. He was my best friend.”

To hear Scrooge expending such emotions between laughing and crying, and to see his heightened and excited face over an animal, a mere dog, would have been remarkable to his business associates in the City.

Snoopy went to his house and jumped on top. Then a number of children came near carrying a small pine tree.

Scrooge grew more excited, “My friends have come with a Christmas tree.”

They braced the tree erect, then decorated it. On finishing, they sang, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the new born King.”

Scrooge looked back to see the boy Scrooge and his book. It was then he read the title, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. He came to the realization that Snoopy and the children were only his imagination of a scene from the book. He never had a real Christmas tree, nor a dog,

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nor a group of friends singing Christmas carols outside his house.

“I wish,” said Scrooge, as he put his hands in his pocket, looked about, and muttered, “But it's too late now.”

“What is the matter?” asked the Spirit.

“Nothing, nothing.” After drying his eyes with his cuff, he continued, “There was a group of children singing a Christmas carol outside my office last night. I should liked to have given them something. That's all.”

The Ghost smiled thoughtfully, and waved its hand, saying as it did, “Let us see another Christmas.”

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As the words were spoken, Scrooge's younger self grew larger and older, the room became more dismal and dirty. The panels shrunk, the windows cracked, fragments of plaster fell off the ceiling. There he was, alone again, when all the other boys had gone home for the jolly holidays.

He was not reading now, but pacing back and forth despairingly. Scrooge looked at the Ghost, then anxiously glanced toward the door. It opened, and a girl, much younger than the boy, came darting in. He bend down to receive her as she put her arms about his neck and kissed his cheek.

“I have come to bring you home, dear brother!” said the girl, clapping her tiny hands and bending down to laugh. “To bring you home, home, home!”

“Home with my dear sister, my little Fan,” returned the boy Scrooge.

“Yes!” she said, brimming of glee. “Home for good and always. Home forever and ever.”

Remembering his father's troubles and the poor conditions at home, he had doubts that it was time to return. “Are you sure father wants me to come home?”

“Our home is so much better, it is like Heaven! And father is so much kinder than he used to be. He spoke gently to me one night when I was going to bed, so I was not afraid to ask him once more if you might come home, and he said ‘Yes,’ and sent me to get you. And you are never to come back here. First we're to be together this Christmas, and have the merriest time in all the world.”

“You are quite the little lady, little Fan. Always thinking of her big brother,” smiled the boy.

She clapped her hands and laughed, and tried to touch his head, but being too little, laughed again, and stood on tiptoe to embrace him. Then she began to drag him, in her childish eagerness, towards the door.

He had nothing but loathing for this place, could not leave quickly enough, and gladly accompanied her.

A terrible voice in the hall cried out, “Master Scrooge. You are ready to leave us?” The schoolmaster himself appeared, who glared on the boy Scrooge with a ferocious condescension which threw him into a dreadful state of mind.

The boy answered with a weak voice, and the children bade the frightening schoolmaster goodbye as they exited the hall, exited the building, escaped that dreadful boarding school forever.

The Ghost said, “Fan was always a delicate flower whom a cold breath might have withered had she not a

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strong will and a large caring heart.”

“She certainly cared for me,” said Scrooge with lowered head. “She was a wonderful, loving, thoughtful, little sister. She saved me from that faithless place. No other has ever loved me as Fan loved me.”

“She died a woman,” said the Ghost. “Had she children?”

“One child.”

“True, your nephew.”

Scrooge felt uneasy as he thought of the conversation and invitation offered him earlier this Christmas Eve. “Yes, my nephew.”

§

Scrooge and the Ghost left the school behind, and were now in a busy city where shadowy crowds battled their way through the turbulence of the night time rush hour. The saving grace was that the streets were lit with brilliant colors, and the shops were dressed for Christmas.

The Ghost stopped at a certain warehouse door, and asked Scrooge if he knew it.

“Know it?” said Scrooge, “I apprenticed here!”

They went in. At the sight of an older portly gentleman sitting behind a desk, Scrooge cried in great excitement, “Why, it's old Fezziwig! Bless his heart, it's Fezziwig alive again!”

Old Fezziwig laid down his pen and looked up at the clock which pointed to the hour of five. He rubbed his hands, adjusted his jacket, laughed all over himself, and called out in a comfortable, rich, jovial voice, “Ho ho ho!

Ebenezer! Dick!”

Scrooge's former self, now a grown young man, came briskly in accompanied by his fellow apprentice.

“Dick Wilkins, to be sure,” exclaimed Scrooge to the Ghost. “Bless me. There he is, he was my best friend, he was.”

“Ho ho ho, my boys,” said Fezziwig. “No more work tonight. It's Christmas Eve. Let's have the shutters up and the place cleaned and cleared for the party,” cried old Fezziwig. With a sharp clap of his hands, “Do it all before a man can say Jack Robinson!”

You wouldn't believe how those two fellows went at it. They put the shutters up, swept and cleared the floor, put up Christmas lights and set up tables and chairs to make the warehouse into a ready made ballroom. Then they came back to their master, panting as heavily as racehorses at the finish line. There was nothing they wouldn't have done, or couldn't have done for old Fezziwig.

Then in came a DJ with his music and sound system, in came Mrs. Fezziwig wearing a vast substantial smile, in came the three Miss Fezziwigs beaming and lovable. In came six young fellows whose hearts the young women had broken. In came all the men and women employed in the business. In came the housemaid with her cousin the baker. In came the cook with her brother's peculiar friend the shopkeeper.

The music started and away they all went, twenty couples at once. There were people round and round in various stages of affectionate groupings in festive conversations and many dances. There were platters of

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appetizers, roast and ham, and there were cakes and apple pies, and plenty of beer. The highlight of the evening came when old Fezziwig stood out with Mrs. Fezziwig to dance the Chicken Dance, a dance from their home country of Holland. Their infectious energy and high spirits got many a person up to dance with no reservations for the way they looked: stepping around, waving their arms, and shaking their bottoms; all ending in an uproar of laughter!

When the clock struck eleven this domestic ball broke up. Mister and Mrs. Fezziwig took their stations on each side of the door and shook hands with every person, wishing him or her a Merry Christmas! When all had left but the two apprentices, the young fellows expressed the same to their employer and his wife by pouring out their hearts in praise. Thus the evening ended, and the lads went home to the small apartment which they shared.

During the whole of this time, Scrooge had acted like an excited teenager putting his heart and soul into every scene with his former self, remembering everything, enjoying everything: the dances, the conversations, the feelings of friendship and warmth toward fellow employees and their associates. He underwent a transition of time and emotions.

It was not until now that he remembered the Ghost, and became conscious of it looking full upon him while the light on its head burnt bright.

The Ghost said, "Such a small matter to make these silly folk so full of gratitude."

"Small?" echoed Scrooge.

"Why, is it not? He has spent but a small amount of

your mortal money. Is it so much that he deserves this praise?"

"It isn't that," said Scrooge, heated by the remark, and speaking as his former self. "It isn't that at all, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or sad, to make our work a pleasure or a toil. His power lies in words and looks, in things he does that some may think slight and insignificant. It is impossible to add and count it all. The happiness he gives is worth a fortune." He felt the Spirit's glance, stopped his speech and looked around.

"What is the matter?" asked the Ghost.

"Nothing particular," said Scrooge as he once again put his hands in his pockets.

"Something, I think," insisted the Ghost.

"Well maybe. I should like to be able to say a pleasant word or two to my clerk just now. That's all."

§

"My time grows short," observed the Spirit. "Quick! we have more Christmases to visit."

At the next place in time, Scrooge saw himself as a man in the prime of life. His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years but it had begun to wear the signs of less emotions of the heart and more calculations of the mind. There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root, and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall.

He was not alone but sat beside a fair young woman in a cute dress. In her eyes were tears sparkling in the light from the Ghost of Christmas Past's crown.

"It matters little to you," she said softly, "very little

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that an idol has replaced me. If you would find love and comfort from my replacement, I have no just cause to grieve.”

“What idol has replaced you?” questioned the young man Scrooge.

“One of gold.”

“There is nothing as comforting as the pursuit of wealth, there is nothing so appalling as being poor.”

“You fear the world too much,” she answered gently. “All your hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond poverty, having money to protect you from suffering. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one until the master passion is for profit.”

“What of it? I have grown wiser in the ways of the world, and I have not changed towards you.”

She shook her head.

“Belle,” began Scrooge, “Have I?”

“When our relationship started, we were both poor, however in love, happy, and content. We hoped to improve our worldly fortune through time and hard work. But along the way you changed, you are another man.”

“I was a boy then,” he said impatiently.

“When we were of one heart, we had the promise of happiness. Now we are going our separate ways, we are fraught with sadness. It is time I release you from our earlier bonds.”

“Have I sought release?”

“No, not in words. Never.”

“In what, then?”

“Your changed personality.” She looked into his eyes, “Everything in your heart that made my love of any worth or value, has changed and gone. Once you looked forward to the joy of our meeting after the working day's end. Now I am but a cost in your balance sheet, no longer an asset.”

He seemed to yield to the justice of this supposition despite himself. He was about to speak, but with her head turned from him, she resumed, “You are a confident man. In a brief time you will forget me as though waking from an unprofitable dream, your memory of me will fade.” In closing, she added, “Best wishes in the life you have chosen.” She then took leave.

Scrooge's eyes followed her until she was gone from sight. He turned to the young Scrooge who simply walked off in his own direction

“Spirit, why do you do this? You show me a happy party, and then you show me a sad parting. Show me no more. Take me home!”

“One more shadow!” exclaimed the Ghost.

“No more,” cried Scrooge. He wanted no more because the last of his happiness had left with her. With a raised voice, “No more! I don't wish to see any more.” He knew the dreariness, the blandness, the business of the rest of his years. What more was there he would possibly want to see?

§

The relentless Ghost forced him to observe what happened in a later scene, in later years. It took place in a house of modest size, full of comfort. On the sofa sat a beautiful young woman so much like his past girlfriend

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that Scrooge believed this woman to be *her*, until he saw *her* enter the room. Belle was now more than twice the age as in the previous scene.

The noise level of the room rose and fell with the energy of his former girlfriend's young children as they raced around. At times they played of one mind, one game, at other times, random actions of mindless fun and laughter. The uproar was beyond belief but no one seemed to care; Belle and her look alike daughter laughed freely, enjoying the chaos. The daughter soon joined in, only to get tumbled by the young mob as they attempted to tickle her into submission.

At first, this agitated Scrooge's state of mind as he was not accustomed to being around young children at unbridled play. He never would have been so rude, oh no! How this bold young brood played without control. As a young boy, Scrooge could never have done it because he would have expected punishment for such rowdiness. His father was not of a mind to allow it, let alone to join in with little Fan and young Scrooge for fun and play.

While the children went on, Scrooge sat down next to his one time sweetheart. He would have dearly liked to have spoken words of endearment, to have touched her lips, to have let loose the waves of hair—an inch of which would have been a keepsake beyond price. But she was only a shadow, and he could not affect the actors in this scene any more than the wandering Ghosts could affect mankind.

Looking back on the children, he did confess a wish to have a license to act as a child, and yet be man enough to know its value. As the laughter continued, he got down

on the floor with the young ones as the games went on. Scrooge, yes Scrooge, got caught up in these childish moments, he felt the laughter was trying to enter his very soul. What he would have given to be one of them? To have such joy with such a family, and join in with them here and now for real.

Now there came a knocking at the door, and immediately the boisterous group rushed to greet their father, who came home laden with Christmas presents. The shouts of wonder and delight heightened as the packages were placed under the Christmas tree with the others. The joy, and gratitude, and ecstasy! It was a fitting crescendo as the children began to tire and their emotions subsided as they went off to bed.

Scrooge looked on as the master of the house, having his daughter leaning fondly on him, sitting down with her and her mother. When Scrooge thought that another graceful creature full of promise might have called him father and been the springtime in his haggard winter of life, his cold heart warmed and his eyes filled with tears of what could have been.

“Belle,” said the husband turning to his wife with a smile, “I saw an old friend of yours this afternoon.”

“Who?”

“Mister Scrooge. I passed his office window and it was not yet closed, and he was inside. I hear his partner lies upon the point of death, and there alone sat Mr. Scrooge. Quite alone in this world, I do believe.”

“Spirit,” said Scrooge in a broken voice. “I don't like what you are showing me.”

“You know these are only shadows,” said the Ghost.

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“They are what was. Do not blame me.”

Scrooge turned upon the Ghost, and seeing it look upon him with a face that in some strange way had fragments of all the faces it had shown him, he wrestled with it. “Spirit of Christmas Past, haunt me no longer! Take me back to the future.”

With no visible resistance on part of the Ghost, Scrooge seized the extinguisher cap, and by a sudden action pressed it down upon the lighted top. The Spirit evaporated under Scrooge's downward force. Only a bit of light leaked out onto the ground under the cap. Having been returned to his own bedroom, he gave the cap a final push and the light ended. His hand relaxed, he was exhausted and overcome by an irresistible drowsiness. He fell into bed, closed his bed curtains, and sank into a deep sleep.

The Second of the Three Spirits



In the middle of a prodigious snore, Scrooge woke up with the feeling it was time for the clock to strike One. It was almost time to hold conference with the second messenger dispatched to him through Jacob Marley's intervention.

He wondered which of his bed curtains this new specter would draw back. Being a man of business, he wanted to be prepared, not to be taken by surprise and made nervous, but to challenge the Spirit on the moment of its appearance. He drew back the curtains, propped up his pillows, and sat back. Thus establishing a sharp lookout, eyes wide open, nothing between a baby and a rhinoceros would have astonished him. However he was not prepared for nothing, and when the bell struck One, and no shape appeared; he trembled.

Minutes passed and as his mind settled, he became aware of a light that should not have been there but which had been there since One. Again his mind became unsettled. Finally, he thought that the source and secret of this ghostly light might be in the adjoining room. He got up softly, shuffling in his slippers to the door.

The moment Scrooge's hand was on the lock, a strange voice called him by name, and bade him enter. He obeyed.

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This room, his room, was warm and wonderfully decorated as never seen while Marley and Scrooge had lived there; it was decorated for Christmas. Crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy were hung on the walls and from the ceiling. In a corner was a tall evergreen, a beautiful Christmas tree with colorful lights, items of the holiday, and topped with a brightly lit angel of white. Tables with turkey stuffed with dressing, ham, duck, deserts of decorated cookies, apple pies, plum puddings, bowls of walnuts and almonds, juicy oranges, luscious pears, Christmas cakes, and drinks of apple cider, sparkling fruit juice, flavorful teas and coffees. It was an overwhelming accumulation of delicious aromas.

At ease, upon the couch, sat a jolly round Giant holding a glowing wand. The wand shed its light on Scrooge as he came peeping round the door.

“Come in,” said the Ghost. “Get acquainted with this Christmas time, for I am the Ghost of Christmas Present. Let us get to know each other, come on in.”

Scrooge entered timidly and hung his head before this Spirit. Although feeling stronger from the Spirit's clear and kind eyes, he did not like to meet them. He was not as prepared as he had wished to be, he was not prepared to look into the eyes of Christmas Present.

The ghost wore a simple red robe bordered with white fur. It had hair and beard of white curls, long and free, free as the gentle face, sparkling eyes, open hand, cheery voice, unconstrained demeanor, and joyful air.

“Have you never seen anyone like me before?” asked the Spirit.

Unbelieving Scrooge asked, “Are you the Santa Claus?”

“No no no.” With a wink, the Ghost of Christmas Present asked, “Do you still believe in Santa Claus?” It then rose.

“Spirit,” said Scrooge submissively, “conduct me where you will. I went forth last night under force, and I learned a lesson, a lesson to open my heart. Tonight, if you have the will to teach me, let me profit by it.” As he spoke the word *profit*, the words of his ex-girlfriend Belle, came back to him, *I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master passion is for profit*. Scrooge rephrased his words, “Spirit, if you the will to teach me, let my heart grow larger by it.”

“I will,” said the Spirit looking into Scrooge's face. “Now touch my robe and we shall be off.”

Scrooge did and held fast.

§

The Christmas room vanished instantly, and they were now standing on a city street Christmas morning. The sky was gloomy, the air a bone-chilling cold, snow piled everywhere, dirt and slush in the streets. There was nothing cheerful in the climate or the town, and yet there was an aura of lightheartedness, the very same as found on the clearest summer day, under the brightest summer sun.

The people shoveling snow away from walkways were jovial, and gleefully calling out holiday cheer to their neighbors. Some children were building snow houses, now and then exchanging mischievous snowballs, while laughing heartily. Soon the steeple bells called the faithful to church and chapel. Away they went, flocking through the streets in their best clothes, and with smiling faces. At the same time there were others going to parties

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or family dinners.

Left were the poor and homeless walking the streets, going nowhere because they had no where to go, and no one to go with. Once or twice, when there were angry words between those going some where and those going nowhere, the Spirit used his Christmas wand to shed light on them, which restored their good humor.

Scrooge heard one say, "It is a shame to quarrel on Christmas day." The other responded, "And so it is!" God love them all, and so it is! Scrooge saw another, after receiving the light from the Spirit's wand, turn around and offer a homeless man some money. The receiver said, "Thank you, Merry Christmas!" The giver felt he was the merrier for the exchange.

"Is there a particular magic in your wand?" asked Scrooge.

"There is. Mine. The magic of Christmas Cheer."

"Would it apply to any person on this day?"

"To any person of a mind to kindly give. And to those who help the poorest, it gives the most."

"Why help the poor? Everyone needs something."

"Because the poor need it most and the giver receives the most in giving to the person who needs the most." Watching Scrooge's response, the Spirit added, "For every action of giving, there is a reaction of feeling good for having given. Do you understand the balance?"

Scrooge nodded, lesson learned, and his heart grew larger.

"Spirit," said Scrooge after thinking for a time, "Why do you, of all the beings in the many worlds about us, desire to cramp these people's opportunities on this day?"

“What do you mean?”

“You would deprive them of their means of working this day. People cannot work in their closed offices and stores. Why would you do that?”

“I?”

“You seek to close these places on your Day, on Christmas Day,” said Scrooge.

“I seek?” exclaimed the Spirit.

“Forgive me if I am wrong, but the twenty-fifth of December is a paid holiday done in your name, and other things are also done in the name of other spirits of your world.”

“There are some in this world of yours,” explained the Spirit, “who lay claim to know us and who do their deeds of passion, pride, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness, in the name of a spirit from our world, and yet they know us not. Remember this, and charge their doings on themselves, not on us.”

Scrooge promised, “I will.”

“Does your clerk have a holiday on Christmas Day because of my will? Or is it your will, or the will of your government?”

Scrooge had never thought of who was to blame for employers having to pay employees for not working on the twenty-fifth of December. With further thought, paying poor employees for a day not worked, was an act of giving; and Scrooge, because his heart had grown, no longer felt inconvenienced by it, but felt good for it. However, he did regret his treatment toward his clerk on Christmas Eve.

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They went on to another city, Scrooge's city, and into the suburbs. Perhaps it was the Spirit's kind, generous, hearty nature, and his sympathy with the poor that led them straight to his clerk's home. On the threshold of the door, the Spirit smiled, and stopped to bless Bob Cratchit's dwelling with a sprinkling of sparkles from his wand.

Scrooge thought, *Imagine that, Bob, only a clerk, and living with a family on a clerk's wage, and yet the Ghost of Christmas Present blessed his apartment.*

Inside was Mrs. Cratchit, Cratchit's wife, dressed drably in a plain dress of no particular style. She laid the table cloth assisted by Belinda Cratchit, second of her daughters, also dressed poorly in sweat pants and a t-shirt. Master Peter Cratchit plunged a fork into the potatoes that were boiling in a pot of water to see if they were soft enough to be finished cooking. Gallantly attired, he rejoiced in his new clothes, very fashionable. And now two smaller Cratchits, a boy and girl, came tearing in, screaming that the turkey smelled ready to eat as it sat there basking in luxurious poultry seasoning, sage, and onion. These young Cratchits danced about the table and exalted their big brother Peter while he waited until the potatoes were done to perfection.

"Where is your brother Tiny Tim and your precious father?" said Mrs. Cratchit. "And Martha wasn't this late last Christmas Day."

"Here's Martha, mother!" said her daughter, appearing as she spoke.

"Why bless your heart alive my dear, how late you are!" remarked her mother, hugging her, then taking off Martha's jacket and scarf for her with loving care.

“We'd had a good deal of work to finish up last night,” replied the girl, “and this morning, I closed the accounting books from home.”

“Well! never mind so long as you are here. Sit down, rest, you've earned it.”

“There's father coming,” cried the two young Cratchits. “Hide, Martha, hide!”

Martha hid herself and in came her father with Tiny Tim upon his shoulders. Alas, Tiny Tim carried a little crutch and had his limbs supported by a steel frame.

Looking round, Bob Cratchit asked, “Has our Martha made it home?”

“Not coming home,” said Mrs. Cratchit.

“Not coming home! Not coming home for Christmas dinner?” said Bob with a sudden drop in his high spirits.

Martha didn't like to see him disappointed, if only joking, and so came out from hiding and ran into his arms.

The two young Cratchits hustled Tiny Tim off into the kitchen to enjoy seeing the dinner preparations.

“How did little Tim behave?” asked Mrs. Cratchit after Bob had hugged his daughter to his heart's content.

“As good as gold and better,” said Bob. “He gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much of the time, and he thinks the strangest things you ever heard. On the way home he told me that he hoped the people in the church saw him because he was a cripple—that it might be humbling for them to be reminded this day who it was that made lame beggars walk and blind men see—especially this day, the day we celebrate His birth.”

Bob's voice trembled when he told them this, and

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trembled more when he said Tiny Tim was growing stronger in heart, if weaker in body.

Tim's clumsy crutch was heard upon the kitchen floor, and they all went in to join him and the others. Peter fetched the turkey to the table. Mrs. Cratchit put the cranberry sauce, turkey dressing, and gravy out. Belinda added bowls of mashed potatoes and butternut squash. Martha set the plates, knives, spoons, and forks. The two young Cratchits set chairs round for everybody. Bob took Tiny Tim to the table to sit beside him. Then they all sat. Grace was said, then Mr. Cratchit sliced the turkey with the carving knife. All sat taller, leaned forward, and they breathed in the delightful smells, and helped themselves to their Christmas dinner.

Bob praised the turkey's tenderness, flavor, size, and congratulated his wife on finding such a low price from the supermarket. All about was unanimous admiration. Mrs. Cratchit said with great delight, the mashed potatoes and squash were smooth and tasty. Peter and his sisters expressed approval of the dressing, all the right balance of herbs, bread, and mushrooms. When everyone had their fill, much to the excitement of the youngest Cratchits, fresh home-baked apple pie and ice cream was brought to the table. Mrs. Cratchit shared her doubts about the quality of crust and the amount of sugar, however everyone had something delightful to say about it. Bob Cratchit declaring it best, "It is the greatest success achieved by my wife since our marriage. What a delicious pie!"

"Spirit," started Scrooge, "They have a good amount of food, natural and made with loving care. However, your tables had far more choices to eat than the Cratchit's. You also had bowls of nuts, fruits, cakes, and

many drinks. What's wrong with them?"

"You might as well ask, 'Why on earth did they get married so young? So poor?'" Then added, "How much do you pay this man anyway?"

Scrooge did not need the reminder.

At last the dinner was done, the table cloth cleared, the dishes washed and put away, then home made Christmas cookies, tea and oranges were put upon the table. The Cratchits drew round in what Bob Cratchit called the family circle.

Bob proposed a toast, "A Merry Christmas to us all. God bless us!" All the family echoed, except Tiny Tim, at last added, "God bless us every one!"

On a small stool he sat very close to his father's side. Bob held his withered little hand in his as if to keep him always by his side. He dreaded Tiny Tim might be taken from him.

"Spirit," said Scrooge with an interest he had never felt before for this family, "tell me if Tiny Tim will live."

"I see a vacant seat," replied the Ghost, "and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die."

"No, no," said Scrooge, "oh, no, kind Spirit, say he will live."

"If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, no one will find him there," returned the Ghost. "What of it if he dies? Better do it and decrease the surplus population."

Scrooge regretted hearing his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief.

The Ghost said, "If in your heart you are a man not

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made of stone, try to discover your own surplus. What do you use your surplus for? For your own enjoyment? What do you enjoy in life? To give to others? For with your surplus, you can decide who shall live, and who shall die.”

Scrooge cast his eyes down upon the ground to consider. But he raised them quickly on hearing his own name.

“To Mr. Scrooge!” said Bob. “The Founder of the Feast.”

“The Founder of the Feast, indeed!” cried Mrs. Cratchit, reddening. “I wish I had him here. I'd give him a piece of my mind to feast upon and I hope he'd have a good appetite for it.”

“My dear,” said Bob, “the children, it's Christmas Day.”

She said, “A day on which one drinks the health of such an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man as Mr. Scrooge? You know he is, Robert. Nobody knows it better than you.”

“My dear,” was Bob's mild answer, “Christmas Day.”

“I'll drink to his health for your sake and the Day's, not for his sake,” replied his wife. “A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! to him.”

The children drank their toast after hers. It was the first of their proceedings which had no heartiness in it. Tiny Tim drank it last of all, but he didn't care for it. Scrooge was an Ogre to the family, the mention of his name cast a shadow on the party darkening it for a full five minutes. After it passed they were ten times merrier than before, from the mere relief of forgetting Scrooge.

Bob told them how he had an eye on a job for Master Peter which would bring in, if obtained, a small weekly salary. The two young Cratchits laughed at the idea of Peter being a man of business. Peter himself looked thoughtful as if he were deliberating what particular investments he should favor when he came into the receipt of an income.

Martha, who was an impoverished apprentice, told them what kind of work she had to do and long arduous hours she worked, and how she meant to lie in bed tomorrow morning for a good long rest, tomorrow being a holiday to pass at home; that she saw a rich business man in the shop some days before, and that the executive was as tall as Peter. At this, Peter sat up straight, ready to take on the world of commerce.

By-and-by Tiny Tim preformed a Christmas Carol. He learned the song listening to carolers the previous night. He sang out in his angelic little voice, "Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, all is bright. Round yon Virgin Mother and Child. Holy Infant so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace." Tim told his family the carolers were poor, had no money but wanted to give a gift to all, and to all they gave Joy to their listeners. His father was again amazed at his Tiny Tim's insight into the hearts of others.

There was nothing of high mark in this. They were not a handsome family, they were not well dressed, their future income would be from lowly jobs, however they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another and contented with their situation. At the end of the evening, as Christmas wound down in the bright sprinklings of the Spirit's torch, they looked happier yet. Scrooge had his eye upon them, and especially on Tiny Tim.

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§

When Scrooge and the Spirit went about the streets, it was early evening. They briefly entered many houses to view family and friends together in wonderfully decorated rooms. At some places they were preparing for a cozy dinner. At other homes there were couples by a fire place snuggled warm inside, far from the cold and darkness of the outside. Others preferred the outside such as children running in the snow, making snowmen, throwing snowballs. And still others were bustling from place to place to join family—their sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. Young single pretty girls dressed in their best were off to a Christmas party where there are young single men waiting, excited to see them arrive.

To Scrooge it seemed there were so many people going everywhere, how could there be any one at home to receive them? Yet, everywhere someone was welcoming guests into their home. There were Blessings of the Season all around, and the Ghost exulted! How it carried on, outpouring with a generous hand its bright and charming mirth on everyone within its reach, especially people alone that had no company other than Christmas itself.

Then, without a word of warning, they stood upon a bleak desert of snow and ice where nothing grew but coarse shrubs and stunted trees. There was a swooshing sound of monstrous mechanical arms moving endlessly up and down as they approached a desolate dark building.

“What is this place? What are those machines?” asked Scrooge.

“We are far far north where men labor to drill and draw oil from the earth to keep your industry running. Even here they know me,” shared the Spirit.

Passing through the wall of the lonely building, they found a cheerful company of men gathered round a table playing cards and having a drink. On the music system was the singing of a Christmas song they all knew when they were boys. From time to time one or all joined in the chorus, “Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells, jingle all the way. Oh what fun it is to play in a one horse open sleigh. Hey!”

The Spirit did not tarry here but bade Scrooge hold his robe, and passing on above, sped hither to the ocean. To Scrooge's horror, looking back, he saw the last of the land fall behind them. Far away from any shore was a solitary ship in the blackness of the sea. On board stood the helmsman at the wheel, and the officers who had the watch. Each man among them hummed a Christmas tune, had a Christmas thought, or spoke softly of a bygone Christmas with those he cares for, whom are at a distance. The men on board had a kinder word for one another on this day more than any other day of the year.

§

While listening to the moaning of the wind, and thinking what a solemn thing it was to move through the lonely darkness over an unknown abyss, Scrooge was greatly surprised to hear a hearty laugh. It was a much greater surprise for Scrooge to recognize it as his own nephew's, and to find himself in a bright room, with the Spirit standing smiling by his side and looking at his nephew with approving affability!

“Ha, ha, ha!” Scrooge's nephew laughed out load. It is unlikely there is another man more blessed with such a

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laugh as Scrooge's nephew, Fred. There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as his laughter and good-humor.

Scrooge's niece, by marriage, is a very pretty woman, with the sunniest pair of eyes ever seen in any creature's head. She laughed as heartily as her husband.

And their assembled family and friends, roared out, "Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" Fred said, "Can you believe he said Christmas was a humbug? And he believes it."

With indignation, Scrooge's niece said, "For shame on him!"

"He's a comical old fellow, that's the truth," said Fred, "And not very pleasant at all. However, my mother, his little sister, loved him dearly. I respect that."

"She did have good words for him," said Scrooge's niece, shaking her head, "God knows why?"

Fred continued, "She remembered he was not always this way, that he had a lonely, troubled childhood. Their father had been a difficult man, during harsh economic times."

"Scrooge has done well for himself. I'm sure he is very rich," hinted Scrooge's niece. "At least, you always say he is."

"What of it? His wealth is of no use to him. He doesn't do any good with it. Not even make himself comfortable with it, let alone benefit us with it—ha, ha, ha!"

"Your mother may have had patience for him, but I have none," said his wife. Her sisters, and all the other ladies expressed the same opinion.

"I still have time for him, and I am sorry for him as

well. Because who suffers by his ill will but himself? Here he takes it into his head to dislike us and he loses out on a festive dinner.”

“Indeed, he loses out on this wonderful dinner,” interrupted his wife. Everybody else said the same, and they knew because they had finished dinner and dessert was on the table.

“I am only saying, because of disliking us, he misses out on fun and good times which would do him good,” said Fred. “And what of companions? He has none. He works in his moldy old office, or sits in his musty old house. Even so, I mean to give him the same chance every year whether he likes it or not, because I pity him.”

Conversation quieted, and being a musical family, they got out their instruments. Scrooge's niece played a simple tune on the harp, Greensleeves, a tune familiar to Scrooge, a favorite of the child that had fetched him from the boarding school, a favorite of this woman's mother by marriage, now gone. The memories of little Fan were fresh on his mind from his journey with the Ghost of Christmas Past. With *the sound of music*, all that the Ghost had shown him came bearing to mind and softened his heart.

After the music they enjoyed games. The teenagers played console games on the TV, the younger ones either watched or played with their Christmas gifts of cars, dolls, and books. Some of the adults played the classic board game, Monopoly.

Monopoly was a favorite of Scrooge, he watched with intensity. When his nephew landed on Park Place, he cheered. But when Fred did not buy, Scrooge was upset because Park Place and Boardwalk are the best

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properties, with these his nephew could win the game. Not long after his niece, the one who played the music of Scrooge's beloved memories, landed on Park Place and bought it.

Scrooge celebrated and said, "There is a smart woman. She could teach my nephew something of business."

His niece went on to gain Boardwalk through wise negotiations. His nephew went on to lose and was soon out of the game. While Scrooge's niece delighted him using wise business skills at Monopoly, his nephew took the role of host, entertaining their guests with drinks and conversation. Scrooge thought his niece should have the job outside the house, and his nephew should stay in the home. When the game wrapped up, his niece was declared the winner. Scrooge was proud of her. His nephew secretly felt the joy of his wife beating his friend Topper, and defeating her own sisters, though they were sharp girls too.

Shortly, Topper went off with a sister of Scrooge's niece, to the sitting room, to be alone with each other. Scrooge's niece and nephew went into the kitchen. The Ghost asked Scrooge to follow them.

"Congratulations!" Fred said to this wife.

"Thanks." Then she asked the question Scrooge wanted to ask, "Why didn't you buy Park Place when you had the chance?"

"You were having such fun with your sisters, Topper was getting close to one of your sisters, and someone needed to take care of our guests."

She gave him a kiss, "Thank you for being so thoughtful."

Scrooge now understood his nephew's wise strategy which had lost him the game, and yet, won him the heart of his wife.

The Ghost was pleased to find Scrooge in good humor, and looked on him with such favor that when Scrooge begged to be allowed to stay until the guests departed, they stayed a few minutes more. Soon the Spirit needed them to move on.

Uncle Scrooge had become so happy and light of heart, he yearned to thank his niece and nephew for showing him a good time. Unfortunately, since he was only a imperceptible guest, he was unable to cause any effect on this occasion.

§

The scene faded, then he and the Spirit were again on their travels. Much they saw, and far they went—from the Arctic, down North America, Latin America, South America, to the Antarctic, into Africa, Europe, Russia, China, South and East Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the islands of the Pacific. Scrooge was amazed at the zest and care with which Catholic families of the poor country of the Philippines celebrated this day with a feast, colorful decorations, a Christmas tree, karaoke singing and dancing. Even in China, a country of many beliefs, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, including Christianity, Christmas is celebrated. The Chinese city of Hong Kong is lit up with spectacular Christmas lights like no other place on earth.

These travels opened Scrooge's mind. He had been unaware of the breadth and depth of World Christmas. Whether foreign lands or in Scrooge's home land, struggling men and women felt greater hope this day.

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They went into many homes to visit, and always created a happy ending. Everywhere the Spirit left Christmas Cheer and his Blessing.

Returning to Scrooge's city, they continued along a quite dark street. Scrooge thought this had been a long Christmas day and evening, and asked, "How much time do you have in this world?"

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Present, my life upon this earth is very brief, it ends tonight at midnight. The time draws near."

As they walked, they came upon two children, a boy and a girl, hiding in a door way, fighting over a stolen wallet. They were wretched, abject, miserable creatures. Where graceful youth should have filled their features and touched them with its freshness of sunshine, they were stale, twisted, shriveled as road kill left forgotten. Where angels might have sat enthroned in their bosom, devils lurked and glared out menacingly.

Scrooge started aback, appalled. Because they were children and he had learned lessons from the Christmas spirits, he wanted to say something heartfelt, but the words choked themselves while in his throat. Rather than be party to a lie, he asked, "Whose are they?"

"They are Man's worst specimens," said the Spirit, looking down upon them. "This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware of both, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow is written Doom. Unless the writing is erased by the people of this city, he is doomed." Stretching out its hands towards the buildings, "Deny it!" cried the Spirit. "People of this city need to be kind to their fellow man. But some do nothing, give nothing!"

"Have they no one to take care of them?" asked

Scrooge. “No where to stay?”

“Are there no orphanages?” said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time, his own words, “Is there still Juvenile Hall for kids that go bad?”

Scrooge shamefully stared at the ground, then looking up at the first chime of Twelve signaling the end of December twenty-fifth, the end of Christmas Day. Scrooge looked about him. He had returned to his room, and the Ghost of Christmas Present...was gone.

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The Last of the Spirits

At the last stroke of Midnight, Scrooge remembered the prediction of Jacob Marley's Ghost. He lifted his eyes to behold the final Ghost. A Phantom draped and hooded came toward him like a mist along the ground.



Abnormally tall, shrouded in a deep dark garment concealing its head, face, figure, leaving nothing visible; its mysterious presence filling Scrooge with solemn dread.

“Am I in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?” Scrooge asked.

The Spirit did not speak, but pointed forward with an outstretched shriveled hand.

“You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen.” Scrooge knowingly pursued, “Is this why you are here?”

The upper portion of the garment tilted for an instant, as if the Spirit had inclined its head. That was the only answer he received.

Although used to ghostly company by this time, Scrooge found his legs trembled beneath him. He could hardly stand because he feared the prospect of a futile

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heartless life leading to a tortured afterlife. Observing his condition, the Spirit paused a moment to give him time to recover, but Scrooge was the worse for it because he feared the oppressive gloom just beyond the spectral hand.

When he regained his senses, Scrooge said, "Lead on, this is precious time you give to me. Spirit, lead on."

As the phantom floated forward, the City seemed to spring up around them. They were in the heart of the financial district where people of commerce hurried around, obsessed about money, looking at their watches, as Scrooge often did, himself. The Spirit stopped and pointed to two business men. Scrooge listened attentively to their conversation.

"No," said the stout man, "I only know he's dead."

The other man, skinny as a broom stick, lit a cigarette, and asked, "When did he die?"

"Last night I believe."

"Why, what was the matter with him?" he asked, as he blew smoke into the air.

"God knows. He had been sick for some time, I thought he'd never die," yawned the fat cat business man.

"What happened to his money?"

"All I know is he hasn't left it to me."

They had a good laugh at that.

"It's likely to be a cheap funeral," said the skinny necked fellow. "I don't know anybody going to it. Suppose we should go?"

"I don't mind going if drinks are provided."

Another laugh.

Their conversation over, they strolled off. Scrooge knew the men and looked towards the Spirit for an explanation, but none was offered. The Phantom glided to another street, close to Scrooge's office. It pointed to two more people meeting on the street. Scrooge listened again, thinking the answer might lie here. He knew these men; they were men of business, wealthy and of great importance. He had made a point of always being held high in their esteem, from a business point of view, that is, strictly for business.

“How are you?” said one.

“Fine,” said the second. “Old Scratch closed his books at last. Kicked the bucket, eh?”

“So I'm told,” returned the second, “so I'm told. Frosty today, isn't it?”

“It is winter alright. Are you a skier?”

“No. No. Got to go, bye.”

Not another word, that was it. Scrooge was surprised the Spirit should attach an importance to such trivial conversations because he could not care less if someone died. Surely they are not speaking of Jacob Marley's death, for that was Past and this Ghost's providence is the Future. Nor could he think of any one immediately connected with himself, and these business men, who might die in the near future.

With this unresolved, he took the opportunity to walk over and look into the window for his own image but it was not there. Not to be dismayed, it actually lifted his spirits, gave him hope that he had carried out a new direction for himself.

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The Phantom stood again with its sinister, outstretched hand pointing to an obscure part of the town where Scrooge had never ventured because of its lowly reputation. The shops, houses, and fences were dilapidated, in need of paint and repair. The sidewalks were crowded with people in worn dreary clothes sitting and standing around, some appearing drunk. Others pushed their life's possessions in shopping carts.

Scrooge and the Phantom came to a Pawn shop, the seediest of all Pawn shops, where anything would be brought for resale, anything. As they came into the presence of the shop manager, two women entered with heavy bundles, closely followed by a man in faded black with a bundle of his own. Upon recognition of each other, they burst into laughter. Old Joe, the shop keeper, knew them all, they were his regulars following a death.

The first woman, a maid by trade, threw her bundle on the floor and sat down in a flaunting manner on a stool. With a look of bold defiance, she said, "Us three together again. What're the odds then, Eh?"

"Every person has a right to take care of themselves. He always did." said Mrs. Dilber.

"It's true, indeed! He sure took care of only himself. Anyway, who's the worse for the loss of a few things like these? Not the dead man I suppose."

"No indeed," said Mrs. Dilber, laughing. "You ever heard the saying, 'if I can't take it with me, I ain't go'in'? Yeah that was him. If ever there was anyone ever meant it, he did. Why, he weren't normal! If he had been, he'd had somebody with him when Death came to visit. Instead he breathed his last by himself, alone."

"Served him right," said Mrs. Dilber. "It was a

judgment on his life.”

“It would have been a heavier judgment on his death, if I could have carried anything else,” laughed the woman.

Sick of all this talk, the man in black mounted the breach and produced his plunder, a few items from the dead man's house, saying, “Let's get this over, I need to get out of here.”

Old Joe severally examined and appraised the items, listed numbers, added a total, and said, “That's the amount, and I won't give more even if you tortured me.”

Mrs. Dilber went next. She became deadly serious, “Open my bundle, Old Joe, and let me know the value of it. No need to be shy, it's no sin.” Towels, a few clothes and boots, silver serving spoons, and kitchen utensils. She was given her total in the same manner.

“And now my bundle, Joe,” said the first woman.

Joe opened it, and dragged out a large heavy roll of cloth. “What do you call these? Bed-curtains?”

“Yes, bed-curtains,” she repeated, leaning forward on her crossed arms, a mad hilarity in her narrowed eyes.

“You don't mean to say you took 'em down, rings and all, with him lying there?”

“Yes I did. Why not?”

“You were born to make your fortune.”

“No sense holding back for the sake of such a man as He was,” said the woman bitterly. “Be careful with those blankets now.”

“His blankets?” asked Joe.

“Whose else do you think? He isn't likely to take cold

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without 'em, I dare say.”

“I hope he didn't die of anything contagious,” said Old Joe, stopping and looking up.

A sickly smile quivered about her lips, “No don't be afraid, I ain't so fond of his company I'd hang around him for such things, if he was. That set of dress clothes is the best he had, and fine ones too. They'd been wasted, if it hadn't been for me.”

“Oh, you don't mean-”

“Yep he'd been buried in them,” chuckled the woman, thinking about her boldness. “Someone was fool enough to waste them good clothes, but I took 'em off him.” She looked up at the frowning funeral man, “Don't worry, I dressed him in one of his cheap business suits. He lived for business, might as well spend eternity dressed in his business suit.”

Scrooge listened in horror as this brought the memory of Marley's Ghost, *destined to roam the earth for eternity dressed in his business suit*. He viewed them with disgust, as they received their money. He thought these hideous demons would have marketed the corpse itself, if Old Joe was in need.

The woman grinned as she was handed her money. “This is the end of it, you see! He frightened every one away from him when he was alive, only to profit us when he died. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

§

As the scene quickly changed, Scrooge recoiled in extreme horror, he was almost touching the bed, the bed bare of bed-curtains. “Oh my God,” he cried.

Beneath a plain sheet there lay a figure, though it was

dumb in speech, it announced itself in an mournful cry. No voice pronounced these words, however, he heard them, "During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit."

He stared at the body, plundered, unwatched, uncared for; then glanced towards the Phantom, its steady hand pointing to the head. Scrooge had a morbid creepy curiosity to draw back the dead man's bed sheet to reveal the identity. But because of the sickening of his heart, he had no will power to move. Here lay this man, dead in this dingy room of misery, with no one to say a kind word, or talk of sweet memories. Scrooge wondered if this man could be raised up now, of what would he speak? Making money, hard dealing, calculated decisions? Would he continue the same conversations as Jacob Marley and the other ghosts of business when they were alive? Surely the same which brought them to a dreadful end, and a tortured existence upon this earth.

"Spirit!" cried Scrooge, "This is a horrible place. I shall remember its lesson, trust me. Let's go!"

Still the Ghost pointed to the head.

"I understand, and I would do it if I could. But I don't have the will. Spirit, I don't."

Again it seemed to look upon him with intense consideration.

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“If there is any person in this city who feels emotions caused by this man's death,” agonized Scrooge, “show me the person. I beg you.”

The Phantom spread its cloak as a dark angel spreads its wings, and in closing the robe, it revealed another room by daylight. There were children with their mother who was anxiously waiting for someone as she fretted about. She jumped at every sound, looked out the window, glanced at the clock, tried in vain to work with her needle and thread, and found the sounds of her children at play unbearable. She raised her voice, and shouted to quiet them.

At length, her husband came home, and she met him at the door. The young man had a remarkable expression on his face, a kind of serious delight which he struggled to repress, for he felt ashamed.

She asked him faintly, “What news?”

He appeared embarrassed, unsure how to answer.

“Is it good or bad?” she asked.

“Bad,” he answered. “No good. No bad.”

“Well? Which is it?”

“Good for us, Caroline,” said her husband. “Bad for him. He's dead.”

Her face spoke the truth; she was thankful in her soul to hear it, and she expressed this with a clap of her hands. In the next moment, she was sorry, prayed for forgiveness, but the first reaction was truly how she felt.

“Last night, the half drunken maid of his, the woman I told you of when I went to see him to obtain a one week delay in payment, said he was sick. I thought it was an excuse to avoid me. Turns out to have been quite true. He

was not only sick, but dying.”

“To whom will our debt be transferred?”

“I don't know,” he could not repress a smile. “By that time, we shall be ready to make the payment. Tonight we sleep without the dogs of credit baying at our door. We are saved, Caroline!”

With the parent's relief, the children smiled as they could now play without their mother's anxious yelling. It was a happier house for that man's death. The people's emotions the Ghost had shown to him were caused by the event of the business man's death, and were all of pleasure.

“One week delay and they are a happy family. I can see how being given so little, could make them so happy,” said Scrooge. “Alive that man could have made them happier by giving with the kindness of a warm heart. That's far better than making them happy from the emptiness of a dead heart.”

§

“Spirit, are all men doomed to an uncaring death? Can there be tenderness and caring when someone dies? Can you show me some warmth connected with another's death? Please show me Spirit or I will be forever haunted by a dark inevitability.”

In the search for tenderness, the Phantom returned them back to the street near Scrooge's office, where earlier, the two business men had talked without care for the dead. The Spirit pointed to a new pair of men. Scrooge brightened at recognition of these two warm souls. He listened in.

Scrooge's nephew, said, “Why Bob, you look a little

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bit down, what's wrong?"

Much to Scrooge's distress, Bob Cratchit told his sad story.

Fred said, "I am heartily sorry for it, Mr. Cratchit, and heartily sorry for your good wife."

"Thank you, I will pass on your kind words to her. She is a wonderful wife, does for us all she can."

"If I can be of any service to you in any way," Fred said, as he handed Bob his card. "That's where I live. Do come and see me. I mean it Bob, you come and see me."

Before the conversation ended, the Ghost led Scrooge forward, through familiar streets. Soon they entered poor Bob Cratchit's house and found the mother and the children seated around the table. Quiet. Very quiet. The normally noisy little Cratchits were as still as statues, looking up at their brother Peter who had a Holy Bible in his lap. But not a word was spoken!

Then, from the Bible, "And he took a child, and set him in the middle of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said to them, Whoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receives me," the words seemed to drift across the room as if in a dream. Had Peter read them out loud? Why did he not go on?

Then Cratchit's wife said, "When will your father come home. It must be time."

"It's past his time," Peter answered, closing his book. "I think he walks a little slower than he used to, mother."

They were quiet again.

At last she said, and in a steady, cheerful voice, that only faltered once, "I have known him to walk with—I have known him to walk with Tiny Tim upon his

shoulders very fast indeed.”

“And so have I,” said Peter.

“And so have I,” exclaimed another. So had all of them.

“He was very light to carry. His father loved him so; it was no trouble, no trouble at all.” She called, “There is your father at the door,” as she hurried out to meet him.

His tea was ready for him on the table, and they all tried to help him to it. Then the two young Cratchits got up on his knees, and each child laid a little cheek against his face, as if to say, “Don't mind it, father, don't be grieved, you still have us.”

Bob was cheerful with them, and spoke pleasantly to all the family.

“Did you go today, Robert?” asked his wife.

“Yes, my dear,” said Bob. “I wish you could have gone. It would have done you good to see how sweet a place it is. But you'll see it often. I promised him I would walk there every Sunday. My little, little child,” his voice fading, “My little child.”

Then he broke down, he couldn't help it. He left, and went into the other room which was decorated for Christmas. Bob sat down, composed himself, reconciled to what had happened, thought of all he still had, and went back again.

At the table, Bob told them of the extraordinary kindness Mr. Scrooge's nephew had shown him today when meeting him in the street. Seeing that Bob looked a little—“Just a little down, you know,” said Bob. “He inquired what had happened to distress me.” On which, Bob said, “He is the most pleasant gentleman you ever

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met. I told him why I was sad. 'I am heartily sorry for it, Mr. Cratchit,' he said, 'and heartily sorry for your good wife.' I don't know how he knows."

"Knows what, my dear?"

"Why, that you are a good wife," smiled Bob.

"Everybody knows that," said Peter.

"Isn't it true," said Bob. "Well, Scrooge's nephew went on, 'If I can be of any service to you in any way,' he said, giving me his card, 'that's where I live. Do come see me.' His kindness and caring was enough. It really seemed as if he had known our Tiny Tim and felt with us."

"I'm sure he's a good soul," said Mrs. Cratchit.

"You would be sure of it, my dear, if you saw and spoke to him. I shouldn't be at all surprised—mark what I say—if he helped Peter with a job."

"Hear that, Peter," said Mrs. Cratchit.

"And then," said an older daughter, "Peter will be finding a wife of his own, and setting up house for himself."

"Get along with you!" said Peter, grinning.

"One of these days," said Bob, "it's going to happen, though there's plenty of time for that. When you do grow up and go your own way, I am sure none of us will forget our sweet little Tiny Tim, shall we? For his is the first parting among us."

Again the words drifted across the room, "And he took a child, and set him in the middle of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said to them, Whoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receives me." The Spirit of Tiny Tim, thy childish essence was from God, and is now with God.

Bob continued, "Although a little child, we shall remember how patient, thoughtful, and mild he was. We are better for having known him. We shall not forget our Tiny Tim."

"We will remember, father!" they all cried again.

"I'm a lucky man," said Bob, "A very lucky man!"

Mrs. Cratchit kissed him, his daughters kissed him, the two young Cratchits kissed him, and Peter shook his hand.

§

"Specter," said Scrooge, "I'm thinking our time is short. What was the name of the man we saw lying dead?"

The Ghost transported him back to the street near his office, though in a different time, he thought. Indeed, there seemed no order in these visions except they are in the Future. But where was he, himself? Scrooge rushed over to look through the window of his office. He wanted to see what he would be in days to come. It was not his office; the furniture had changed, and the figure in the chair was not himself. He struggled to reason off the nervousness devouring his hope of redemption.

The Spirit's hand pointed elsewhere. He joined it bewildered as to why and where they were going next. In time, they reached an iron gate containing a cemetery next to a churchyard. The burial ground was choked up with too many corpses. It was fat with an unfulfilled appetite. Here, the unloved man lay six feet under the cold hard surface.

The Spirit stood among the graves and pointed down to One. Scrooge staggered towards the shadows of the

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future, sick to his soul of what he was about to see.

“Before I look at the stone,” said Scrooge, “Answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be?”

The Ghost continued pointing down at the grave.

“A Man's choices foreshadow a certain end, to which, if persevered, they must lead to that end. But if the choices are not persevered, the end will change. Say it is so with what you are about to show me, say it is so. I don't want to be that man.”

The Phantom's pointing hand screamed at Scrooge to see the writing on the grave stone.

Scrooge crept towards it and read, read his own name, *Ebenezer Scrooge*.

Taking in the full impact of this premonition, he fell down upon his knees crying, “I am that man lying on that bed, dead and neglected.”

The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again.

“No, Spirit. Oh no, no, no!”

The Phantom stood stolid.

“Spirit!” he cried, seizing its robe, “Hear me! I am not the man that I was. I will not be that man. Why show me this, if I am past all hope? Tell me I can erase the words written in stone!”

For the first time the hand appeared to shake and tremble.

“Good Spirit, your wavering makes me feel that I may choose another path to change these shadows of this future yet to come. I will honor Christmas in my heart,

and try to keep it all the year long.”

The Phantom lowered its spectral hand and placed it on Scrooge's shoulder.

“Kind Spirit, I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons taught.”

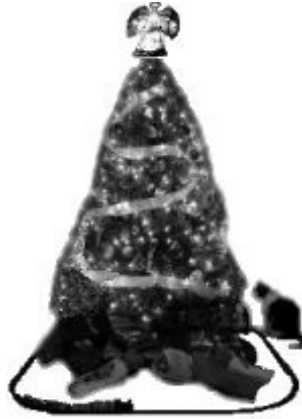
The Spirit began to change, the hood and cloak shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

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The Joy of Christmas Day

Yes! His own bedpost, his own bed, his own room. Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own.

“Oh, Jacob Marley! I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future! The Spirits of all Three Christmas Times shall live within me,” praised Scrooge.



Holding one of his bed curtains in his arms, he cried, “They are not torn down, they are here—I am here—the shadows of the things that would have been may be dispelled. They will be, I know they will!”

There was the glorious morning sunshine through his window. He scrambled out of bed, all a flutter and glowing with good intentions. He tried to dress himself, however in his state of mind, his hands were busy turning clothes inside out, putting them on upside down, and making strange mix and matches.

“I don't know what to do,” laughed Scrooge, crying in the same breath, while making a perfect loon of himself. “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as giddy as a schoolboy on the last day of school. A Merry Christmas! to everybody! A Happy New Year! to the whole world! Yahoo!”

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Scrooge went around the room, “There's the door the Ghost of Jacob Marley entered! There's the corner where the Ghost of Christmas Present sat! There's the window where I saw the wandering Spirits! It's all right, it's all true, it all happened.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” For a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh, the father of all brilliant laughs!

“I don't know how long I've been among the Spirits,” said Scrooge. “I don't know what day it is.”

Running to the window, he opened it, and put his head out. No fog, no mist, it was a clear bright golden sunlit day. What a glorious day!

“Hello young man,” yelled Scrooge, calling down. “What day is it?”

“Eh?” returned the boy with wonder.

“What day is it today?” asked Scrooge.

“Today?” replied the boy, “Why it's Christmas Day.”

“It is Christmas Day!” said Scrooge to himself. “I haven't missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night. They are the same as Santa Claus who goes to homes all over the world in one night. Of course they can, of course they can do it.”

“Hello, my fine fellow! I need help getting a Christmas gift, can you help?”

“Are you crazy? All the stores are closed,” exclaimed the boy.

“Do you know the Denny's Restaurant on the next street, on the corner?”

“I sure do.”

“They are open. I want them to make up a gift basket of Christmas desserts and drinks. Tell them to put it on my tab. They can phone me to confirm. My name is Ebenezer Scrooge. Bring it back here. Be quick and bring it back in 30 minutes,” he threw money down to him, “and I will double your bonus for helping me!”

The boy was off like a shot.

“Then I'll send it to Bob,” whispered Scrooge, rubbing his hands, with a laugh. “He shan't know who sent it. Bill Murray never made such a joke as sending a surprise to Eliot Loudermilk's!”

With an unsteady hand, he wrote down the address and waited for the phone call from Denny's restaurant. The manager called, and Scrooge, much to the manager's surprise, said Merry Christmas! He asked him to make the basket as big as possible, and he would get a big tip. After the phone call, Scrooge went downstairs to receive the basket, which soon showed up.

“Here it is. Woo hoo!” It was a Christmas basket as big as Tiny Tim. Scrooge said, “Please help me with one more favor, take a taxi and deliver it for me but do not tell them who sent it. No wait, tell them it's from Santa Claus, the Spirit of Christmas Giving.”

He chuckled when he said this, he chuckled when he paid for the taxi, and he chuckled when he compensated the boy. Alone on the street, he went back inside his home, sat down breathless in his chair, and chuckled till he sobbed.

Scrooge dressed himself in Christmas colors, and at last got out onto the streets. The people by this time were pouring forth as he had seen with the Ghost of Christmas Present. He went walking with his hands behind him,

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head held high, and regarded every one with a delightful smile. He looked so irresistibly pleasant, that three or four good humored fellows said, "Good morning, and Merry Christmas!" People greeting Scrooge with pleasantries was quite new to him. He thought this a wonderful sound.

After a time, coming towards him was the portly gentleman who had walked into his office the day before, and been so cheerful and hopeful that Scrooge might be charitable, only to be turned away. It sent a pang across his heart to think how this old gentleman would look upon him when they met.

However he knew what new path lay before him, and he took it. "My dear sir," said Scrooge, taking the elderly gentleman's hand and shaking it. "How do you do? I hope you succeeded yesterday. It was very kind of you to have stopped by."

"Mr. Scrooge?"

"Yes," said he. "That is my name, and I fear it may not be pleasant to you. Allow me to ask your pardon for yesterday. And will you have the goodness to accept my donation of —," Scrooge whispered in his ear.

"Lord bless me!" said the gentleman, as if his breath were taken away. "Mr. Scrooge, are you serious?"

"If you please, nothing less, and that includes a great many back payments."

"My dear sir," said the other, shaking his hand, "I don't know what to say to such—"

"Don't say anything, please," retorted Scrooge. "Come and see me. Will you come and see me?"

"I will!" exclaimed the old gentleman. And it was

clear he meant to follow up.

“Thanks,” said Scrooge, “I am much obliged to you. I thank you fifty times over. Bless you! And Merry Christmas!”

He went to church, walked about the streets, watched people hurrying to and fro, greeted parents and their children, gave money to beggars, and found everything yielded pleasure this special day. He had never dreamed that any walk—that anything—could give him so much happiness.

§

In the afternoon he went to his nephew's house. He looked up at the door, strode up and down the street a dozen times before he had the courage to go up and knock, but he did.

“Is your father home, my dear?” said Scrooge to the girl. Nice girl! Very nice.

“Yes sir.”

“Where is he?” said Scrooge.

“He's in the dining-room, sir, along with mama. I'll show you if you like.”

“I would like you to show me. Thank you.” Before entering the room, Scrooge said, “He knows me, I'll take it from here.”

As he entered, his nephew was looking at the table which was spread out in great array, for these young housekeepers are always careful on such details, and like to see everything is right.

“Merry Christmas Fred!” Scrooge greeted him loudly.

Dear heart's alive, how his niece jumped! Scrooge had

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missed her sitting there beside the Christmas tree, or he would have been softer.

“Why, bless my soul!” cheered Fred, “It’s Uncle Scrooge.”

“It is me. I have come to dinner as you asked. Will you still have me?”

“Of course we will have you join us,” said Fred extending his hand in welcome.

For Heaven sake, if his uncle didn’t almost shake his arm off.

In a few minutes, Scrooge felt right at home. Nothing could be more heart-warming. His niece looked just the same as in his journey with the Spirit of Christmas Present. And so did Topper when he came in, and the sister which was Topper’s special friend, and everyone when they came in. It was a wonderful party, wonderful music, wonderful games, won-der-ful happiness!

The next morning he was early into the office. Oh, how he wanted to catch Bob Cratchit coming in late. And he did, yes, he did! The clock struck nine. No Bob. A quarter past. No Bob. Scrooge sat with his chair turned to see him come in. When he did, he was a full eighteen minutes late.

His hat and coat were off before he opened the door. He was on his chair in a flash, diving away at the stack of papers, as if he were trying to overtake nine o’clock.

“Hello!” growled Scrooge in his accustomed voice as near as he could feign it. “What do you mean by coming here late?”

“Excuse me?” said Bob. “I’m only a bit late.”

“You are,” repeated Scrooge. “Step this way if you

please.”

“It's only once a year,” explained Bob. “It shall not be repeated. It was a rather Merry Christmas yesterday.” Then remembered Scrooge didn't like that phrase.

“Now, I'll tell you what, my friend,” said Scrooge. “I am not going to stand for this sort of thing any longer. And therefore,” leaping from his chair, he gave Bob such a dig in the side it caused him to stagger backward. “And therefore I am giving you a salary raise!”

Bob looked warily at his boss, and took another step backward. He had a momentary idea of knocking Scrooge down should he come closer. The man's gone crazy.

Scrooge said, “Merry Christmas, Bob!” as he clapped him on the shoulder with an earnest smile that could not be mistaken. “I wish you a Merrier Christmas than I have ever wished anyone. I'll raise your salary, and I will endeavor to assist you and your family. We will discuss your affairs this very afternoon over a holiday lunch.”



Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. To Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. To his nephew Fred and his wife, Scrooge was everything one could wish for in an uncle. He became as good a friend, and as fine a man, as the good City ever knew. He opened his mind and heart by traveling beyond his office, his home, his city, to other countries.

Some people laughed to see the alterations in him, and

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he let them laugh, and heeded them little, because he was wise enough to know that nothing good ever happens on this earth which some people do not have their fill of laughter over. Anyway, his own heart had grown in leaps and bounds, causing him to laugh with a healthy spirit, which was quite enough for him.

Ebenezer had no further interaction with Ghosts, their principle lessons he remembered ever after. It was then said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, as well as anyone can. May that be truly said of us all. And so, as Tiny Tim observed, “God bless Us, Every One!”