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## This is a reproduction of the painting 'The Dinner Party' by the Dutch artist William Verelstam. The scene is set in a dark, intimate room where a group of approximately 15 people, dressed in 18th-century clothing, are gathered around a long table covered with a white cloth. The lighting is dramatic, coming from a source on the left, which casts strong highlights on the figures and the table while leaving much of the room in deep shadow. In the foreground, a man in a dark coat stands looking towards the viewer, while a woman sits next to him, her attention focused on a large open book or document. The table is laden with various dishes, including what appears to be a large roast, and a central floral centerpiece. Other guests are engaged in conversation or eating. The background features a dark wall adorned with several framed pictures and a clock. The overall mood is one of quiet domesticity and social interaction.

and Other Victorian Fairy Tales by  
John Ruskin, W. M. Thackeray,  
George MacDonald,  
and Jean Ingelow



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# **A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens**

**and Other Victorian Fairy Tales  
by John Ruskin, W. M. Thackeray,  
George MacDonald, and Jean Ingelow**

Selected with an Introduction  
by U. C. Knoepfelmacher



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A CHRISTMAS CAROL  
AND OTHER VICTORIAN FAIRY TALES  
*A Bantam Book*

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Charles Dickens's *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* is the most famous celebration of Christmas—and family love—ever written. Tight-fisted Scrooge, humble Bob Cratchit, and little Tiny Tim are among Dickens's most beloved characters, showing us the real nature of charity, the power of tenderness, the wisdom of innocence in a hardhearted world. Now, in a volume selected and introduced by children's literature expert U. C. Knoepfelmacher of Princeton University, Dickens's classic story is presented alongside four other great Victorian tales:

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# Introduction

When Charles Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* in December of 1843, as the first of his five annual Christmas books, he evoked a response that almost rivaled the reception accorded to his celebrated *The Pickwick Papers*, seven years earlier. Once again, Dickens had managed to devise a brand-new literary form. His fairy tale was simultaneously realistic and dreamlike. In it he managed to acknowledge the stark social realities of the 1840s and yet express, at the same time, the wishful desire to dissolve that present through the fluidity of a myth of rebirth and renovation. The mixture was exquisitely suited to the aspirations of his reading public. Victorian reviewers were ecstatic. "Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this?" asked W. M. Thackeray in a review for *Fraser's Magazine*. "It seems to be a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness." And, lest his assertion be open to challenge, Thackeray turned to the testimony of other witnesses: "The last two people I heard speak of it were women; neither knew the other, or the author, and both said, by way of criticism, 'God bless him!' A Scotch philosopher, who nationally does not keep Christmas Day, on reading the book, sent out for a turkey; and asked two friends to dine—this is a fact! Many men were known to sit down after perusing it, and write off letters to their friends, not about business, but out of their fulness of heart, and to wish old acquaintances a happy Christmas. Had the book appeared a fortnight earlier, all the prize cattle would have been gobbled up in pure love and friendship, Epping denuded of sausages, and not a turkey left in Norfolk."

Although Thackeray ends this tribute with characteristic playfulness, his testimonial is indeed based on "fact." The Scotch philosopher converted to Christmas spirit and Christmas feasting was none other than Thomas Carlyle. Jane Welsh Carlyle wrote in amazement that her dyspeptic husband, upon reading *A Christmas Carol*, was so violently "seized

with a perfect *convulsion* of hospitality" that he "actually insisted on *improvising two* dinner-parties with only a day between." She was delighted but also dismayed (for she did not know how to stuff a turkey). Thackeray's reliance on the example of Carlyle as a reader transformed by the power of Dickens's art is deliberate. In *Past and Present*, a work published earlier in 1843, the "Scotch philosopher" had inveighed against the ills of his age. Although he, too, had delved into the spirit of times past to give shape to his hopes for a better society of the future, his skepticism remained dominant. Thackeray thus subtly equates Carlyle with Scrooge, another figure of disbelief and doubt who fails to observe Christmas Day. Scrooge's intense skepticism propels him at first to dismiss Marley's ghost as an empirically verifiable phenomenon. Just as an adult reader may want to resist Dickens's powers of fantasy, so does Scrooge try to resist the hallucinatory fascination that his partner's ghost has for his awakened imagination: "You may be an undigested bit of beef," he protests to Marley, "a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato." But Scrooge's resistance crumbles. The rigid conventions by which he has governed his life are relentlessly eroded by the successive visits of his supernatural guests, the spirits of Past, Present, and Future released by his unconscious.

Dickens's fable of transformation continues to exert its hold on our own collective imagination. In our minds Christmas and Dickens have long ago somehow become synonymous. "Scrooge" has become a household word for that repressed and oppressive social self we yearn to shed in an annual ritual of renovation. Curiously enough, *A Christmas Carol* has become a secular parable that appeals to would-be believers of all denominations. (My grandfather, an orthodox Jew who certainly did not "keep Christmas Day," nonetheless religiously read the story on that day to his children in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.) That the Christian elements are there is undeniable, of course. The tale involves a conversion, the resurrection of an old man who can again become "as humble as little children." In *The Life of Our Lord*, a little book that he privately wrote for his children a few years after the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens gave special prominence to the words of Jesus, "Whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me." Dickens added,

"Our Saviour loved the child and all children." It is through his rekindled love for Tiny Tim, to whom he becomes "a second father," that Scrooge illustrates this doctrine. Early in the book Marley's crippled ghost appears, weighted down by his chain of adult transgressions, "cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel." The very first sentence in the *Carol* insists, laconically and implacably, "Marley was dead: to begin with." Yet this grim beginning is overcome. The story ends by lingering on a Tiny Tim "who did NOT die"; its last sentence invoking the blessings uttered by this innocent, who can now look forward to a future without crutches. By severing himself from the ways of his dead partner and by adopting Tiny Tim's innocent faith, Scrooge attains a salvation that is this-worldly rather than other-worldly. Made immortal through Dickens's art, Scrooge survives as an emblem for our own yearning for renewal and liberation.

If *A Christmas Carol* has at its core the liberal theology that Dickens shared with other Victorians, the book's mythic energies stem from more universal psychological sources. It is noteworthy that the three spirits who visit Scrooge in this "Ghost Story of Christmas" (the *Carol*'s original subtitle) are ghosts rather than angelic messengers. Indeed, in an earlier and inferior version of this myth, the "Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton," interpolated in *The Pickwick Papers*, the role of the ghostly visitors was filled by underground gnomes who abduct the Scrooge-like Gabriel Grub on Christmas Eve and torture him into becoming a good-natured and contented man. Like the three spirits, the goblins who terrorize Grub the Grave-Digger confront him with consequences of a denial of those primal and elementary memories too easily buried by a hardened adult psyche. The greater scope of *A Christmas Carol* allowed Dickens to give much wider play to that process of repression and to locate Scrooge's loss in his inability, as an adult, to cling to the child's capacity for absolute and unqualified belief.

The Spirit of Christmas Past thus forces Scrooge to behold himself in his former, more vulnerable yet also more inviolable, incarnation as a "solitary child, neglected by his friends." Dickens invites the reader to recognize in that earlier abandonment the sources of Scrooge's defensive recoiling from human contact. Yet Scrooge's younger self, we are also asked



to notice, was never wholly deserted. His little sister Fan—whose commitment to him, we now realize, is still being honored in the present by her son, Scrooge's nephew Fred—acted as a buffer between him and the stern father who had banished him to school. It is she who persuaded their father to allow her to bring her brother back home. Before his inevitable maturity (“‘And you're to be a man!’ said the child, opening her eyes”), brother and sister could rekindle their childhood oneness and delay the onslaught of time, their eventual severance as adults. But the child Ebenezer could rely on the support of other companions as well. Figures from fairy tales and juvenile romances—Ali Baba and the Sultan's groom from *The Arabian Nights*, Valentine and his wild brother Orson, and that fellow solitary, Robinson Crusoe—appeared to the boy as vivid and actual presences. Indeed, it is the reality that these fictional personages once held for him that will eventually allow Scrooge to reactivate the dormant powers of belief stirred by his ghostly visitors.

As Scrooge nostalgically reimmerses himself in a recreation of the tales that sustained his childhood imagination, he suddenly, “with a rapidity of transition very foreign to his character,” bursts into tears. It is his first real catharsis. Yet Scrooge not only pities “his former self,” the youthful self he now at last allows to resurface, but also remembers a present child, the young boy whom he had so harshly repulsed in the first chapter. Contritely, he acknowledges his relation to that living child: “There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something: that's all.” It is not all, of course. But Scrooge has taken an important first step in the process of reclaiming his emotional core.

*A Christmas Carol* is a fable for adults in need of such a reclamation. It is written by a man who persistently remembered having once been an imaginative and contented little boy. Like the four authors of the tales for children also included in this collection, Dickens set out to recover the child's innocence and strong capacity for make-believe. That recovery was, for Dickens and his fellow Victorians, absolutely essential to the adult's mental well-being. Like his creator, Ebenezer Scrooge must rescue and reanimate the suppressed “transition” that converts a healthy child into a healthy adult. In *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy*

*Tales, Fantasy, and Novel-Making*, Harry Stone has shown the crucial role played by the fairy stories and romances that nourished Dickens's early imagination. Again and again, Dickens relied on his childhood imaginings to give shape to his mature art. For he understood what Scrooge must come to recognize: the need and the value of our repeated return as grownups to the magical thinking of the child.

The metamorphic power of *A Christmas Carol* depends on that intuitive understanding. Scrooge is suitably horrified when the Spirit of Christmas Present forces him to behold "two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable." The boy, Ignorance, and the girl, Want, are premature adults, the products of a civilization that stifles its young and stunts them into grotesque aberrations. At the end of the story, however, as a playful Scrooge gleefully indulges his newfound willingness to regress, such phantasms can be exorcised. Linear time has been annulled for the reborn child-man: "'I don't know what day of the month it is!' said Scrooge. 'I don't know how long I have been among the Spirits. I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby. Hallo! Whoop! Hallow here!'" The new Scrooge no longer repels child visitors from his door. As he beckons the boy decked out in Sunday clothes, he heaps encomia upon encomia with exaggerated but infectious playfulness: the "fine fellow" he welcomes with such relish soon becomes "an intelligent boy," "a remarkable boy," "a delightful boy." Scrooge's delight emanates from the irrepressible sense of wonder and well-being he has recovered. Though he earnestly assumes the new role of adult benefactor and philanthropist, he has been internally renovated by his ability to retrieve the child within. The dismal realities of Victorian England can be dissolved.

At the end of *A Christmas Carol* the reinstated imagination of the child once again reigns triumphant. Seizing on the figure of Tiny Tim as an embodiment of that triumph, Thackeray concluded his review of the story by asserting, "There is not a reader in England but that little creature will be a bond of union between the author and him." Thackeray's insight still holds true. For if the healed Scrooge acts as the agent for our deep yearning for psychic integration, the healed child symbolically satisfies that yearning for reader and author alike,

a yearning shared by grownup and child, by “all of us,” “Every One!”

The transformational process that plays so central a role in *A Christmas Carol* is just as integral to the other four major Victorian fantasies reproduced in this volume—John Ruskin’s *The King of the Golden River* (1851), William Makepeace Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring* (1854), George MacDonald’s “The Light Princess” (1864), and Jean Ingelow’s *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869). Each of these works involves the same traffic between illusion and realism, the child’s wonder and the adult’s skepticism. And, once again, it is the agency of fairy-tale magic that helps bridge these contrary states.

In depicting Scrooge’s conversion, Dickens began from the adult’s vantage point. Ruskin, Thackeray, MacDonald, and Ingelow, however, reverse that perspective from the start. Their protagonists are boys and girls still situated in the realm of innocence Scrooge was forced to regain. Their movement, therefore, is not backward but forward to maturation and mastery. If Dickens addressed the same adult audience who read his major novels, the other four fantasists regarded the child or adolescent as their prime reader. Just as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books began as stories privately told to Alice Liddell, so did the works of Ruskin, Thackeray, MacDonald, and Ingelow posit a special and privileged child auditor. Ruskin addressed the ten-year-old Effie Gray when he, as a young man of twenty-two still unsure of his own vocation and goals, wrote *The King of the Golden River* (by the time the work was lavishly published ten years later, he had achieved notoriety as an art critic). Thackeray fashioned *The Rose and the Ring* as a Christmas pantomime for his daughters Minny and Anny, as well as for a younger child, the American Edith Story, before he decided to share the work with a wider public. MacDonald seems to have tried out “The Light Princess” on his own children (who were also exposed, in the same year, to a trial reading of *Alice in Wonderland* by his friend Lewis Carroll). Jean Ingelow dedicated *Mopsa the Fairy* to a “little cousin,” Janet Holloway; when she speaks of Jack as a boy “whom I knew very well,” she is presumably drawing on memories of her favorite brother William Frederick, who had been nine years her younger.

By embracing the child’s point of view, however, these

four authors enlist the same regressive capacities that animated Dickens's art. Indeed, as in the case of Dickens, it is precisely their ability to hold on simultaneously to childhood wishfulness and to the grown-up's more sober notions about reality that gives their writing its elasticity and richness. Conflict and harmony are allowed to interpenetrate and coexist. Like Scrooge, Ruskin's Gluck, Thackeray's Giglio and Rosalba, MacDonald's Light Princess and her sober Prince, Ingelow's Mopsa and Jack, all must effect a blending that involves the mundane and the extraordinary; freedom and responsibility; the modalities of male and female; the child's magical thinking and the adult's awareness of mutability, compromise, and death. The quality and extent of that blending may vary greatly, as does each story's narrative mode. Yet Ruskin's earnest didacticism, the comic mixtures fashioned by Thackeray and MacDonald, and Ingelow's lyrical fusion and eventual sundering of separate realities have a common goal. Like Dickens's *Carol*, these stories express a profound yearning for the dissolution of the false values of a civilization alienated from its primitive strengths.

Just as *A Christmas Carol* is rooted in the romances Dickens read as a child, so is *The King of the Golden River* an imitation of the Grimm fairy tales (illustrated by the famous Cruikshank) that gripped Ruskin's childhood imagination. The androgynous Gluck—who looks very much like a little girl in the drawings Ruskin commissioned from Richard Doyle, Cruikshank's successor—is immediately set in apposition to his sadistic older brothers. A Cinderella figure, frail and vulnerable, Gluck will be rewarded by "the little man," the "golden dwarf, about a foot and a half high," whom he has unwittingly freed from the malicious enchantment of a much "stronger" fairy king. Whereas the story's first supernatural visitor, South-West Wind, Esquire, acted as an analogue to the phallic violence of Gluck's adult brothers, Schwartz and Hans, the King of the Golden River is to be seen as Gluck's own counterpart, himself a victim in need of liberation. Although his powers by far exceed those of the passive boy, he merely turns the destructive nature of the two Black Brothers against itself. When Gluck feebly remonstrates with the dwarfing for having been "so cruel," he is reminded that the transgressions of Hans and Schwartz—like those of Dickens's Marley—were simply self-defeating.

Gluck is Ruskin's version of Tiny Tim. At the end of *The King of the Golden River* he is left in charge of the fertile valley his older brothers had desecrated and polluted. Like Dickens, Ruskin relies on a biblical rhetoric in depicting the recovery of a lost Eden: "And, when he came in sight of the Treasure Valley, behold, a river, like the Golden River, was springing from a new cleft of the rocks above it, and was flowing in innumerable streams among the dry heaps of red sand." Yet this miraculous transformation is the product of what Carlyle called a "natural supernaturalism." Gluck has found neither the material treasure his brothers sought nor St. Matthew's heavenly riches. He is merely reinstated in a pastoral world he now administers as benignly as Scrooge administered his city wealth: "And Gluck went, and dwelt in the valley, and the poor were never driven from his door: so that his barns became full of corn, and his house of treasure." No wife joins Gluck as fellow guardian of the womblike valley's natural riches. Instead, the asexual youth reigns as a matriarchal as well as a patriarchal provider. As the young Ruskin's tribute to the still younger Effie Gray (whom he later married, with disastrous consequences), *The King of the Golden River* not only tries to remove the discord between the adult's acquired rapacity and the child's innate benevolence but also attempts to eradicate all distinctions of gender. Although this parable significantly anticipates the matured Ruskin's organicist thinking about economics, ecology, and religion, it can also be read as his attempt to exorcise a male sexuality he regarded as unduly aggressive.

No such softening shapes Thackeray's persistently ironic *The Rose and the Ring*, a work that capitalizes on the very frictions that Ruskin is so eager to remove. Like Schwartz and Hans, the kings Valoroso and Padella are power-hungry usurpers. But instead of dwelling on a single dispossessed child like Gluck, Thackeray charts the separate fates of male and female heirs and carefully distinguishes young Giglio and Rosalba from another pair of adolescents, Bulbo and Angelica. And whereas the prepubescent Gluck remains arrested, it is the growth of his young protagonists that concerns Thackeray. That growth is supervised by a Fairy Blackstick who uses her magic sparingly. Though powerful enough to turn men into metal, the fairy wisely allows "things to take their natural course" in promoting the maturation of her nurslings. Scarcely

using her wand "except as a cane to walk about with," she bequeaths a "little *misfortune*" to her godchildren in order to instruct them in self-reliance. Like Thackeray, she clearly regards the magical rose and ring as crutches for those infirmer minds who, like Bulbo and Angelica, cannot do without the props of make-believe.

It would be a mistake, however, to read *The Rose and the Ring* as an anti-fairy tale. Thackeray does not intend to subvert the magic he praised in Dickens's *Christmas Carol* and the drawings of fairy tale illustrators such as Richard Doyle. In "De Juventute," an essay written before *The Rose and the Ring*, he expressed his desire to fashion a story that would appeal equally to child and adult, thereby establishing a lifelong tie "between writer and reader." Thackeray's own drawings reinforce this duality. The Fairy Blackstick, Rosalba, and Giglio are represented realistically, while all others are rendered as caricatures (Bulbo's enormous head, so disproportionate to his body, makes him resemble a giant baby). By playfully calling attention to his story's exaggerations and contradictions, Thackeray attempts to find a middle way between child and adult. Laughter dissolves all boundaries. The mockery of male prowess renders hero-worship impossible for both the reader nursed on boyish adventure stories and the reader of military gazettes (the story debunks the contemporary war in Crimea). The boastful and sadistic Count Hogginnarmo gets eaten up by lions who purr like contented kittens when stroked by Rosalba; but the true dramatic contest is between two strong female figures, represented without any of Ruskin's restraint, the greedy, sex-starved, but resourceful Gruffanuff (a fairy-tale version of Thackeray's more famous Becky Sharp) and the potent Fairy Blackstick. If the latter's spells paradoxically allow her wards to grow up in a world devoid of magic, Thackeray, too, cautiously steers between the realms of innocence and experience, subscribing to neither, and yet to both.

MacDonald's "The Light Princess" opens on a comic note that appears to be Thackerayan. Here, also, the tone seems unmistakably tongue-in-cheek. The king and queen who quarrel in the beginning chapters are as bourgeois a couple as King Valoroso and his wife (though here the queen is obviously more acute than her dull-witted mate). In their metaphysical differences, the disputing court-philosophers Hum-Drum and

Kopy-Keck recall Thwackum and Square in Fielding's *Tom Jones*, a work also embedded in *The Rose and the Ring*, where Giglio's imprudence and innate goodness distinctly resemble Tom's. If Thackeray parodied Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet* or *Henry IV*, MacDonald seems eager to subvert the trappings of the Grimm fairy tale that Ruskin so earnestly adapted for his own purposes. MacDonald self-consciously exploits a running pun in his multiple permutations of the words "light" and "grave." Still, though initially lighthearted, he unexpectedly switches into a Ruskin-like gravity when the princess finds her vitality drained by the drying lake. Here, as in *The King of the Golden River*, the fate of the protagonist becomes identified with the natural and symbolic agent of water. Only by confronting death and rebirth can the princess be converted to a proper balance between thoughtless levity and emotional depth.

Like MacDonald's tale, Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* is a work full of surprises. Our expectations are consistently subverted. What begins as a boy's tale of adventure gradually turns into a mythic fable that probes into the burdens placed on an emerging female imagination. The little fairy girl whom Jack, the quintessential British boy, has patronized begins to outstrip her stolid protector. As the two children venture deeper and deeper into the heartland of a series of fairy provinces, Mopsa discovers that she is fated to rule as a powerful, yet also powerless, fairy queen. A poet of considerable renown in her own day, Jean Ingelow relied on ellipsis and indirection to en flesh the insight of Wordsworth's famous "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: / The soul that rises with us, our life's star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar."

Transported afar, Jack, "the growing Boy" of Wordsworth's poem, is allowed to rise to an intimation of the primordial reality where Mopsa must forever remain. But his glimpse of that immortal domain is short-lived. Reluctantly, he must return from this female realm of the imagination to the practical, everyday world ruled by his father, a Victorian paterfamilias. As he returns to the house of his parents Jack is stripped of his former powers. He ceases to be an imaginative voyager and begins "to forget . . . even his little Mopsa, more and more." Read in one fashion, Ingelow's inventive and original

fairy tale is by far the most fantastical of the fables included in this collection. Yet in its resigned acceptance of the chasm that eventually separates Mopsa from Jack, the imagination from actuality, *Mopsa the Fairy* is also more reality oriented than the works of Dickens, Ruskin, MacDonald, and even Thackeray. As an imaginative work that ultimately prizes Jack's acquiescence to the ordinary and matter-of-fact world in which he will slowly grow up, Ingelow's book relies on paradox to span the opposition between the contrary states that so fascinated her contemporaries and that still engross us today.

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