

ENGLISH LITERATURE SERIES

A
CHRISTMAS CAROL

DICKENS



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A Christmas Carol

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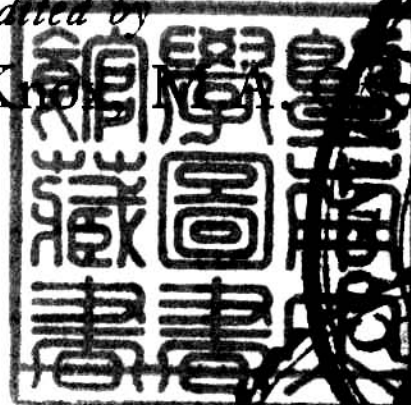
A Ghost Story of Christmas

By

Charles Dickens

Edited by

Christina F. Kidd, K.A.



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A CHRISTMAS CAROL



MR. FEZZIWIG'S BALL.

INTRODUCTION

‘AN old-fashioned Christmas’—‘a Dickens Christmas’—how often, as the end of the year approaches, people speak of this to each other :—they like it, or hate it, or mean to have it, or fear they can’t afford it. It means something quite definite to every English heart.

Dickens loved Christmas. You can read some time his other Christmas pictures, especially the one in *Pickwick* ; but the *Christmas Carol* is the best known one of all, for it is a splendid story in itself and specially interesting in all sorts of ways. For one thing, it is Dickens in little. He loved Christmas because he had the kindest nature and the largest heart imaginable, and Christmas gives everyone a chance to be kind and large-hearted in the highest possible degree. He rejoiced in bustling crowds and cheerful faces : most of all, in happy homes. And Christmas, of course, is the festival of all these things.

If we want to be more critical, we might say that in the *Christmas Carol* we see a concentration of Dickens’ faults as well as of his virtues. But the virtues weigh heavily down the scale. The story is told with such energy, such interest, such good-humour. The figures all make such vivid, clear pictures. Scrooge shivering in front of the fire—the nephew with the red comforter—poor Bob Cratchit with a white one—we should know them at a glance if we met them in everyday life. Everyone is alive all the time. If we feel that perhaps the bad people are too thoroughly bad, the good too perfectly good, the poor too completely poor, the sentiment in places

rather more than we can comfortably bear, this does not really prevent our enjoyment of a story so admirably told, the details of place, of time, of person so dexterously made real for us, the warmth of heart that sets us all in a glow as we read.

It is interesting, too, though it does not affect the story's impression on us, to gather in passing some of the great differences that time has made in custom and in ways of thought since the *Christmas Carol* was first published in December 1843. One point certainly is that holidays were scarce. Bob Cratchit is allowed Christmas Day off as a favour, and is humbly grateful for it. Old Fezziwig's apprentices sleep under the counter and feel it no hardship. Every act of kindness from employer to employed, or from rich to poor, is done as an act of charity (willingly or otherwise), and accepted as such. To-day we live more in the time of rights and privileges.

Then notice, too, what a great deal is thought of food: not in variety and choiceness so much as in quantity. The Ghost of Christmas Present is simply enthroned on solid food. But no one describing a Christmas to-day would talk first about eating. That would come in, no doubt. But there would be much more about Christmas presents, and letters from friends. We have learnt to eat less, and have felt the effects of railways and cheaper posts.

A Christmas Carol does not really need a special introduction. The best thing is to read it and enjoy the story, which no one could help enjoying, and then give a little time afterwards to thinking of its special interest. Dickens wrote it for us just as a Christmas story, and it remains a modern prose "King Wenceslas." But its author was really great, and it tells us so much that it is worth examining much more carefully than most stories, and will begin to make us understand why Dickens is still as faithfully beloved as he was in those distant and different days.

THE AUTHOR

CHARLES DICKENS was born in February, 1812, in a suburb of Portsmouth ; his father was a clerk in the navy pay office, and his work took him, and his family, to Chatham when Charles was only a few years old. In 1821 the father lost his post and was plunged into great poverty (they lived now in shabby lodgings in Camden Town), and was before long arrested and imprisoned for debt. After some years of wretchedness the family fortunes improved, and the boy was sent to school, and afterwards to a solicitor's office. He determined, however, to become a journalist, taught himself shorthand, read and worked with enormous enthusiasm, and finally obtained work as a reporter which necessitated his travelling all about England. As yet there were no railways, and his experiences were varied. Soon after this he began to write articles and sketches for various papers and magazines. In 1836 were published *Sketches by Boz*, and the same year *Pickwick Papers* were begun. From this time Dickens' success and popularity steadily increased with the long list of his works. He married in 1836 the daughter of George Hogarth, editor of the *Evening Chronicle*, and lived and worked keenly and vigorously till June, 1870, when he died at his home at Gadshill. *A Christmas Carol* was written in 1843.

HELPS TO FURTHER STUDY

The best 'further study' is to read more of Dickens himself—the other 'Christmas Books' and the Novels—and to enjoy him. But older readers who want to know more about the man and his art may be strongly recommended to read Forster's *Life of Dickens* and George Gissing's *Charles Dickens*; these two books are, respectively, the best biography and the best critical study. There are some fine pages of criticism in Prof. O. Elton's *Survey of English Literature*, 1830-80, vol. ii, and there is an interesting chapter by Prof. Saintsbury in *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. xiii.

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BY JOHN LEECH

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STAVE ONE

MARLEY'S GHOST

MARLEY was dead to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind ! I don't mean to say that I know of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a 10 coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile ; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the country's done for. You will, therefore, permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Scrooge knew he was dead ? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise ? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole 20 residuary legatee, his sole friend, and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on

the very day of the funeral, and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain.

The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an
10 easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot—say St. Paul's Churchyard, for instance—literally to astonish his son's weak mind.

Scrooge never painted out old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door. Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him.

20 Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried
30 his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days, and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

External heat and cold had little difference on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often 'came down' handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with 10
gladsome looks, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and, when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, 'No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!' 20

But what did Scrooge care? It was the very thing he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance, was what the knowing ones call 'nuts' to Scrooge.

Once upon a time—of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve—old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather; foggy withal; and he could hear the people in the court outside go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement 30
stones to warm them. The City clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already—it had not

been light all day—and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that, although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms. To see the dingy cloud come drooping down, obscuring everything, one might have thought that nature lived hard by, and was brewing on a large scale.

- 10 The door of Scrooge's counting-house was open, that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was copying letters. Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room ; and so surely as the clerk came in with the shovel, the master predicted that it would be necessary for them to part. Whereupon the clerk put on his white comforter, and tried to warm himself at the candle ;
- 20 in which effort, not being a man of strong imagination, he failed.

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

' Bah ! ' said Scrooge. ' Humbug ! '

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

30 sparkled, and his breath smoked again.

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

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

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

Scrooge, having no better answer ready on the spur of the moment, said, 'Bah!' again; and followed it up with, 'Humbug!'

'Don't be cross, uncle!' said the nephew. 10

'What else can I be,' returned the uncle, 'when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas-time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books, and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will,' said Scrooge indignantly, 'every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own 20 pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!'

'Uncle!' pleaded the nephew.

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

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

'Let me leave it alone, then,' said Scrooge. 'Much good may it do you! Much good it has ever done you!'

'There are many things from which I might have 30 derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say,' returned the nephew; 'Christmas among the rest.

But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas-time, when it has come round—apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that—as a good time ; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time ; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of
10 creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good and *will* do me good ; and I say, God bless it ! ’

The clerk in the tank involuntarily applauded. Becoming immediately sensible of the impropriety, he poked the fire, and extinguished the last frail spark for ever.

‘ Let me hear another sound from *you*,’ said Scrooge, ‘ and you’ll keep your Christmas by losing your situation ! You’re quite a powerful speaker, sir,’ he added,
20 turning to his nephew. ‘ I wonder you don’t go into Parliament.’

‘ Don’t be angry, uncle. Come ! Dine with us to-morrow.’

Scrooge said that he would see him—Yes, indeed he did. He went the whole length of the expression, and said that he would see him in that extremity first.

‘ But why ? ’ cried Scrooge’s nephew. ‘ Why ? ’

‘ Why did you get married ? ’ said Scrooge.

‘ Because I fell in love.’

30 ‘ Because you fell in love ! ’ growled Scrooge, as if that were the only one thing in the world more ridiculous than a merry Christmas. ‘ Good afternoon ! ’

‘Nay, uncle, but you never came to see me before that happened. Why give it as a reason for not coming now?’

‘Good afternoon,’ said Scrooge.

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

‘Good afternoon!’ said Scrooge.

‘I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute. We have never had any quarrel to which I have been a party. But I have made the trial in homage to Christmas, and I’ll keep my Christmas humour to the last. So A Merry Christmas, uncle!’

‘Good afternoon,’ said Scrooge.

‘And A Happy New Year!’

‘Good afternoon!’ said Scrooge.

His nephew left the room without an angry word, notwithstanding. He stopped at the outer door to bestow the greetings of the season on the clerk, who, cold as he was, was warmer than Scrooge; for he returned them cordially.

20

‘There’s another fellow,’ muttered Scrooge, who overheard him: ‘my clerk, with fifteen shillings a week, and a wife and family, talking about a merry Christmas. I’ll retire to Bedlam.’

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

‘Scrooge and Marley’s, I believe,’ said one of the gentlemen, referring to his list. ‘Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge, or Mr. Marley?’