Charles Dickens'

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

A retelling by

TANYA LANDMAN



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For Doug, Alex, Jay, Hope and Holly

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PREFACE

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Their faithful friend and servant,

Charles Dickens
December 1843

STAVE 1

MARLEY'S GHOST

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt about that. Jacob Marley was as dead as a doornail. The record of his burial was signed by the vicar, the clerk and by Scrooge himself. So Scrooge knew Marley was dead.

Scrooge was the only friend and mourner at Marley's funeral, and he went back to work afterwards.

The two men had been business partners for years, with both their names painted above the door of their counting-house. Scrooge was too mean and miserly to pay a man to paint over Marley's name after his death, so from then on customers sometimes called Scrooge "Marley" instead of "Scrooge". He answered to both names. It was all the same to him.

Oh, but Scrooge was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping,

clutching, covetous old sinner! Scrooge was as hard and sharp as flint and as solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his features, nipped his pointed nose, made his eyes red and his thin lips blue. Scrooge walked stiffly, his voice grated and his icy heart never thawed, not even at Christmas.

Nobody ever greeted Scrooge with a smile. No beggars ever pleaded for a coin or two from him. Any man or woman who lost their way in the city streets never asked Scrooge for directions. Even the blind men's dogs would tug their owners away when they saw him coming.

What did Scrooge care? He went through life glaring a warning to the rest of humanity to keep its distance.

Once upon a time, Scrooge sat working in his counting-house. It was Christmas Eve, exactly seven years after Marley died. The weather was cold, bleak and biting. The city clocks had only chimed three in the afternoon, but it was already dark. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole. It was so thick that the houses opposite had become phantoms. Scrooge's office door was open so that he could keep an eye on Bob Cratchit, his clerk. Bob sat in the small and dismal room beyond, copying letters.

Scrooge's fire was small, but Cratchit's was so tiny it barely had one piece of coal. There was no hope of Bob stoking it up. Scrooge kept the only coal scuttle in his room and guarded each precious lump as if it were a diamond. So Bob sat with his scarf wrapped three times around his neck in an effort to keep warm.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle!"

The cheerful voice of Scrooge's nephew, Fred, broke the silence as he opened the door and came in.

"Bah!" replied Scrooge. "Humbug!"

Fred had walked so fast along the city streets in the frost and fog that he was all in a glow. His face was ruddy and handsome. His eyes sparkled.

"Humbug, Uncle?" Fred said with a laugh. "You can't really mean that Christmas is nonsense?"

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

"What right have you to be miserable?" Fred replied. "You're rich enough!"

Scrooge had no answer, so he repeated, "Bah! Humbug!"

"Don't be cross, Uncle," said Fred gently.

"What else can I be, living in a world of fools?" Scrooge grumbled. "If I had my way, every idiot

who goes about shouting 'Merry Christmas' should be boiled with his own pudding. Then buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

"Uncle!" protested Fred.

But Scrooge did not stop. He pointed an accusing finger at his nephew. "What's Christmas to you but a time for finding yourself a year older and not an hour richer? What good has Christmas ever done you?"

"There are many things that do me good even if I make no money from them!" Fred replied cheerily. "Christmas is a good time, a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time. It's when men and women agree to open their shut-up hearts freely. It is the only time I know of when the rich and powerful think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave and not another race of creatures. It's true that Christmas has never put gold or silver in my pocket, but I believe that it *has* done me good and *will* do me good, and I say, God bless it!"

Bob Cratchit could not help himself. He agreed wholeheartedly with Fred and clapped with approval. Seeing Scrooge's furious face, Bob regretted it and turned his attention to his fire.

Giving it a poke, he put out the last frail flame for ever.

"If I hear another sound from you," Scrooge said to Bob Cratchit, "you'll celebrate Christmas by losing your job."

"Don't be cross, Uncle!" Fred begged Scrooge once more. "Come dine with us tomorrow."

But Scrooge refused. And when Fred asked why, Scrooge simply demanded, "Why did you marry a girl without a dowry?"

"Because I fell in love," Fred replied.

"You fell in love!" mocked Scrooge.

But Fred's cheerfulness did not desert him. He wished his uncle a Merry Christmas again and left the building, exchanging warm and heartfelt season's greetings with Bob Cratchit on the way.

As Fred went out, two plump, pleasant-looking gentlemen came in. Scrooge was known to be a very wealthy man, and the two newcomers were collecting money for the city's poor and destitute.

"They suffer greatly at this time of year," one of the gentlemen told Scrooge. "Many thousands lack even the most basic necessities."

"Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.

"There are plenty of prisons," replied the gentleman, looking puzzled.

"And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation?"

"They are," said the gentleman. "But I wish I could say they were not."

"The Treadmill and the Poor Law are alive and well?" said Scrooge.

"Both are kept very busy, sir."

"Oh! I'm very glad to hear it," said Scrooge. "I was afraid from what you said that something had stopped them working. Those who are badly off must go there."

"Many can't go there, and many would rather die," muttered the gentleman.

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it and decrease the surplus population."

The gentlemen saw it was useless to say more and left, shocked and upset. Scrooge went back to work feeling rather pleased with himself.

Meanwhile, the fog and the darkness thickened. The ancient tower of a church, whose gruff old bell was always peeping down at Scrooge out of an arched window, became invisible. After that, it chimed as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen head.

The cold grew intense. But the lamp heat from shop windows turned pale faces pink as they hurried along the streets. Traders were so brisk and merry that buying and selling became a glorious carnival! Everyone – high and low – played a part. From the Lord Mayor to the little tailor he had fined five weeks ago for being drunk in the streets. The Lord Mayor gave orders to his fifty cooks to keep Christmas in a style suiting a Lord Mayor's household. Meanwhile, the little tailor stirred up tomorrow's pudding while his skinny wife and baby dashed out to buy beef.

Everyone was preparing for the festivities. Everyone but Scrooge. When a carol singer stopped outside the counting-house, Scrooge reacted so fiercely that the lad fled in terror. He'd not even got out the first line of "God Bless Ye, Merry Gentlemen!"

Scrooge and Bob Cratchit sat working silently until the day was at last done.

"You'll want the whole of tomorrow off, I suppose?" Scrooge said to his clerk. "If I stopped some money from your wages to cover it, you'd think me unfair. Yet why should I pay you a full day's pay for no work?"

Bob Cratchit replied in a soft voice that Christmas was only once a year.

"A poor excuse for picking my pocket every 25th December!" said Scrooge as he buttoned up his overcoat. "Be sure to be here all the earlier on the 26th."

The clerk promised he would, and Scrooge walked out with a growl.

Bob closed the office in an instant and left work with the long white ends of his scarf dangling below his waist (for he had no coat). He joined a group of laughing boys who were sliding down the ice in the street. After that, Bob scampered home to Camden Town to play party games with his family.

Scrooge ate a melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern. Having read all the newspapers, he spent the rest of the evening looking through his accounts book before going home to bed.

Scrooge lived in the gloomy suite of rooms that had once belonged to Marley. He was the only person who lived in the building. There was a wine merchant's store in the cellar, and the rest of it was rented out as offices.

It is a fact that there was nothing odd about the door knocker apart from its large size.

It is also a fact that Scrooge had seen that large knocker, night and morning, every day that he'd lived there.

And there are two facts more to know.

One is that Scrooge had no imagination whatsoever. Two is that he had given no thought at all to his business partner Jacob Marley since he had died seven years before.

And yet, as Scrooge put his key in the lock of the door and his eyes fell on the knocker, he saw Marley's face in it.

Marley's face! It was glowing with dismal light, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar.

As Scrooge stared, it became a knocker again. To say he was not startled would be untrue. But Scrooge turned his key firmly, walked in and lit a candle.

He *did* pause before he shut the door. He *did* look behind it, as if he half expected to see the back of Marley's head sticking out. But there was nothing, and so he said, "Pooh, pooh!" and closed the door with a bang that resounded through the house like thunder. Every room above and every cask of wine in the merchant's cellar below seemed to echo with it. Scrooge was not a man to be frightened by echoes. He fastened the door, walked across the

hall and set off with his one small candle up the dark stairs. Darkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it.

Once he'd reached his rooms, he checked that there was nobody under the table, or behind the sofa, or in the bed. Then he closed his door and double-locked it, which was not his usual custom. Scrooge then sat huddled very close to a small fire.

The fireplace was an old one and paved with tiles painted with the faces of people from the Bible. Yet tonight each of those faces seemed to be Marley's.

Scrooge threw his head back against the chair. His eyes came to rest on an old, forgotten bell that hung in a corner of the room. It was with great astonishment and dread that he saw the bell begin to swing. It rang out loudly. And so did every other bell in the building. It lasted maybe half a minute. It felt like an hour.

When the bells ceased, Scrooge heard a clanking noise, deep down below. It was as if some person was dragging a heavy chain over the casks in the wine merchant's cellar.

The cellar door flew open with a booming sound, and then Scrooge heard the same clanking noise much louder. It was coming up the stairs! Towards his door!

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

But the noise came on without a pause, through the heavy, double-locked door into Scrooge's room.

Marley's Ghost!

He had the same face. The same clothes he had worn in life. But now there was a bandage wrapped around his head and a long chain wound about his middle like a tail. The chain was made of cashboxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers and heavy purses of steel. His body was transparent. Scrooge, looking through Marley's waistcoat, could see the two buttons sewn on the back of his overcoat.

He saw the figure standing before him and felt the chill of its death-cold eyes, and yet Scrooge still did not believe it.

"What do you want with me?" Scrooge said, his tone as cold as ever.

"Much!"

It was Marley's voice, no doubt about it. But Scrooge still resisted. "Who are you?" he replied.

"Ask me who I *was*," said the Ghost.

"Who *were* you then?" asked Scrooge.

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

"Can you – can you sit down?" asked Scrooge doubtfully.

"I can," said the Ghost. He settled himself in a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace and looked at Scrooge. "You don't believe in me."

"I don't," admitted Scrooge.

"Why do you doubt your senses?"

"Because," said Scrooge, "the smallest thing twists them out of shape. A slight disorder of the stomach makes the senses liars! You may be an undigested bit of beef or an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"

Scrooge was not in the habit of cracking jokes, but this was an attempt to crush his terror. He was shaken to the very marrow of his bones. Scrooge's horror grew greater when the Ghost took off the bandage wrapped around his head and his lower jaw dropped down on his chest.

The Ghost gave a shattering cry and rattled its chain. "You who sees nothing but the world, do you believe in me or not?"

Scrooge fell to his knees and whimpered, "I do! I must! But why do spirits walk the earth, and why do they come to me?"

"Everyone's spirit," the Ghost replied, "is required to walk amongst their fellow creatures. But if a spirit does not go forth amongst humanity

in life, it must do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world and witness what it cannot share now, but might have shared on earth and turned to happiness!"

Again the Ghost cried out in pain and shook its chain.

"You are fettered," said Scrooge, trembling. "Tell me why?"

"I wear the chain I created in life," replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link and yard by yard. I made it of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to *you*?"

Scrooge trembled more and more but said nothing.

The Ghost continued, "Or do you wish to know the weight and length of the chain you wear yourself? Yours was as heavy and as long as mine when I died seven years ago. It has grown much longer since. Yours is a hefty, cumbersome chain!"

Scrooge glanced about him on the floor as if he expected to see lengths of iron cable, but there was nothing.

"Jacob," he said pleadingly. "Old Jacob Marley … Can you give me no comfort, Jacob?"

"I have none to give," the Ghost replied. "And I cannot stay any longer. In life, my

spirit never walked beyond our counting-house, our money-changing hole! So now, endless weary journeys lie before me. I had a lifetime of opportunities for doing good. They were all wasted!"

"But you were a good man of business," said Scrooge.

"Business?" cried the Ghost. "Mankind should have been my business! The common welfare should have been my business. Charity, mercy, kindness should all have been my business! Why did I walk among crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down? Why did I never raise them to that same bright star that led the Wise Men to a stable? Surely there were poor homes to which its light might have guided me! I might have made some difference in the world. I might have made some things better. But my time with you is nearly gone. I am here to warn you. You have a chance to escape my fate. You will be haunted by Three Spirits."

Scrooge's face fell. "I think I'd rather not," he said.

"Without them, you cannot hope to avoid the path I tread," the Ghost said. "The first will come tomorrow morning when the bell tolls one."

"Couldn't they all come at once to get it over with?" asked Scrooge.

The Ghost said only, "The second will come the next night at the same hour. The third on the next, when the last stroke of twelve has ceased to sound. You will see me no more. But remember what has passed between us!"

The Ghost once more wrapped the bandage about its head, its teeth clacking loudly as its jaws were brought together. And then the apparition walked backwards, away from Scrooge and towards the window, where it stopped and beckoned Scrooge to approach. Outside, incoherent sounds of mourning and sorrowful wailings filled the night air.

Scrooge looked out of the window. The air was filled with phantoms wandering about in a restless haste, moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost. A few were linked together. Scrooge saw with fear that many were men he had known when they were alive. One cried in pity when it saw a wretched woman huddled on a doorstep with her baby. It reached out, but its hand passed straight through her.

Scrooge realised that all the phantoms were weeping and wailing with misery. In life, they had

been blind and indifferent to the sufferings of their fellow men. In death, they could see and feel it all and yet do nothing to help.

As Scrooge watched, the creatures faded into mist. Their voices disappeared. The night became as it had been when he'd walked home.

Scrooge turned away from the window. He tried to say "Humbug!" but stopped at the first syllable.

It was past two o'clock in the morning. Feeling very tired, Scrooge went to bed and fell asleep in an instant.