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READING A CLASSIC VICTORIAN FABLE

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STAVE I

*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 anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.

Mind you—I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a doornail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a 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 doornail.

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 heir, 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 solemnized 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.

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterward, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called him *Scrooge*, and sometimes *Marley*, but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him.

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, shriveled 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 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 influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, nor 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 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 creature ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place of Scrooge. But

what did Scrooge care? It was the very thing he liked—to edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all sympathy to keep its distance.



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—and foggy. He could hear the townsfolk in the court outside go wheezing up and down, beating their paws upon their chests, and stamping their feet upon the pavement 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 neighboring 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.

The door of Scrooge's counting house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, a lowly rodent 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.

Wherefore the small chipmunk clerk put on his white comfoter, and tried to warm

himself at the

candle; in which effort, not being a

creature of a 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 sparkled, and his breath puffed 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 heartily. “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.

“What else can I be,” returned the uncle, “when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas? Out with your merry Christmas! What’s Christmastime 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 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 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 Christmastime, 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 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 forever.

“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, turning to his nephew. “I wonder you don’t go into Parliament.”

“Don’t be angry, Uncle. Come! Dine with us tomorrow.”

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.”

“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 humor 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.

“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.”

The timid clerk, in letting Scrooge’s nephew out, had let two other men in. They were portly gentlemen, a possum and a mole, who now stood with their hats off in Scrooge’s office. They had books and papers in their paws, and bowed to him.

“Scrooge and Marley’s, I believe,” said the possum, referring to his list. “Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge, or Mr. Marley?”

“Mr. Marley has been dead these seven years,” Scrooge replied. “He died seven years ago, this very night.”



“We have no doubt his liberality is well represented by his surviving partner,” said the possum, presenting his credentials.

It certainly was, for they had been two kindred spirits. At the ominous word *liberality*, Scrooge frowned, and shook his head, and handed the credentials back.

“At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge,” said the mole, taking up a pen, “it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessities; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir.”

“Are there no prisons?” asked Scrooge.

“Plenty of prisons,” said the mole, laying down the pen again.

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

“They are. Still,” returned the possum, “I wish I could say they were not.”



“The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigor, then?” said Scrooge.

“Both very busy, sir.”

“Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course,” said Scrooge. “I’m very glad to hear it.”

“Under the impression that they scarcely furnish Christian cheer of mind or body to the multitude,” returned the mole, “a few of us are endeavoring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?”

“Nothing!” Scrooge replied.

“You wish to be anonymous?”

“I wish to be left alone,” said Scrooge. “Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don’t make merry myself at Christmas, and I can’t afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned—they cost enough—and those who are badly off must go there.”

“Many can’t go there; and many would rather die.”

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population. Besides—excuse me—I don’t know that.”

“But you might know it,” observed the gentleman.

“It’s not my business,” Scrooge returned. “It’s enough for a fellow to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people’s. Mine occupies me constantly. Good afternoon, gentlemen!”

Seeing clearly that it would be useless to pursue their point, the gentlemen withdrew. Scrooge resumed his labors with an improved opinion of himself, and in a more facetious temper than was usual with him.

Meanwhile the fog and darkness thickened so that lads ran about with hand torches, offering their services to go before horse carriages, and conduct them on their way. The ancient tower of a church, whose gruff old bell was always peeping slyly down at Scrooge out of a gothic window in the wall, became invisible, and struck the hours and quarters in the clouds, with tremulous vibrations afterward, as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen head up there. The cold became intense. In the main street, at the corner of the court, some laborers were repairing the gas pipes, and had lighted a great fire in a brazier, round which a party of ragged animals—young and old—were gathered, warming their paws and winking their eyes before the blaze in rapture. The brightness of the shops where holly sprigs and berries crackled in the lamp heat

of the windows, made pale faces ruddy as they passed. Bakers' and grocers' trades became a splendid joke—a glorious pageant, with which it was next to impossible to believe that such dull principles as bargain and sale had anything to do. Lord Toad the Mayor, in the stronghold of the mighty mansion house, gave orders to his fifty cooks and butlers to keep Christmas as a mayor's household should; and even the little shrew tailor stirred up tomorrow's pudding in his attic loft, while his wife and the baby sallied out to buy the cheese wheel.

Foggier yet, and colder! Piercing, searching, biting cold. A young street child, his little nose gnawed by the hungry cold as bones are gnawed by dogs, stooped down at Scrooge's keyhole to regale him with a Christmas carol, but at the first

sound of "God bless you merry gentleman!

May nothing you dismay!" Scrooge

seized the ruler with such energy

of action that the singer fled

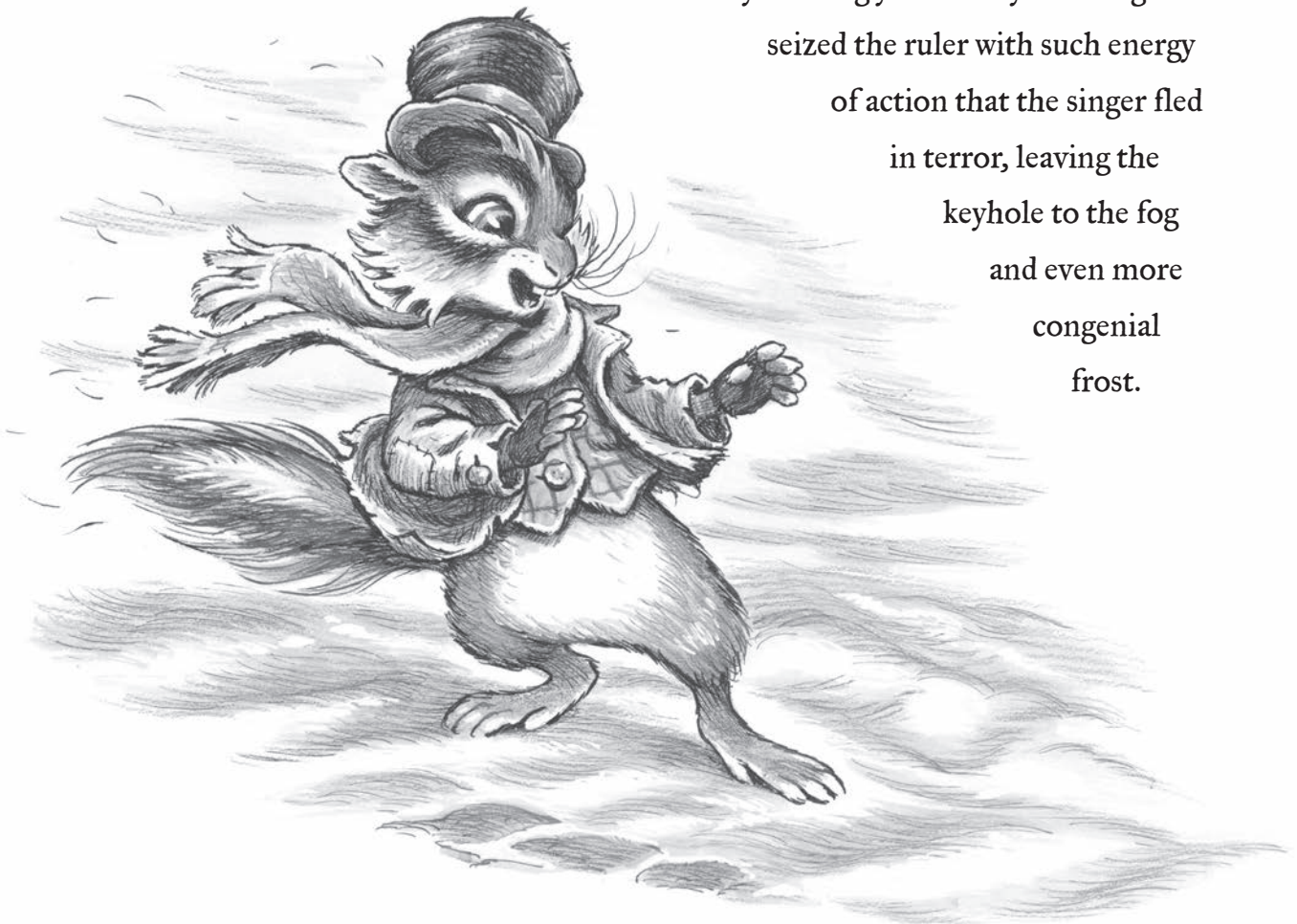
in terror, leaving the

keyhole to the fog

and even more

congenial

frost.



At length the hour of shutting up the counting house arrived. With an ill will Scrooge dismounted from his stool, and tacitly admitted the fact to the expectant clerk in the tank, who instantly snuffed his candle out, and put on his hat.

“You’ll want all day tomorrow, I suppose?” said Scrooge.

“If quite convenient, Sir.”

“It’s not convenient,” said Scrooge, “and it’s not fair. If I was to stop half-a-crown for it, you’d think yourself ill-used, I’ll be bound?”

The clerk smiled faintly.

“And yet,” said Scrooge, “you don’t think *me* ill-used, when I pay a day’s wages for no work.”

The clerk observed that it was only once a year.

“A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of December!” said Scrooge, buttoning his greatcoat to the chin. “But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next morning!”

The clerk promised that he would; and Scrooge walked out with a growl. The office was closed in a twinkling, and the clerk, with the long ends of his white comforter dangling below his waist [for he boasted no greatcoat], went sliding down an icy street, at the end of a lane of boys, twenty times, in honor of its being Christmas Eve, and then ran home as hard as he could pelt to play hide-and-seek.



Scrooge took his melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern; and having read all the newspapers, and beguiled the rest of the evening with his banker’s book, went home to bed. He lived in chambers which had once belonged to his deceased partner. They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of

building up a yard, where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and have forgotten the way out again. It was old enough now, and dreary enough, for nobody lived in it but Scrooge, the other rooms being all let out as offices. The yard was so dark that even Scrooge, who knew its every stone, was fain to grope with his paws. The fog and frost so hung about the old black gateway of the house, that it seemed as if the spirit of the weather sat in mournful meditation on the threshold.

Now, it is a fact, that there was nothing at all particular about the knocker on the door, except that it was very large. It is also a fact, that Scrooge had seen it night and morning during his whole residence in that place; also that Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the city. Let it also be borne in mind that Scrooge had not bestowed one thought on Marley since his last mention of his seven-years' dead partner that afternoon. And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his





