

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

CHARLES
DICKENS

TIMELESS CLASSICS





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Scrooge's Office

Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.

Of course Scrooge knew he was dead. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his only friend and his only mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event.

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 about to tell you.

Scrooge had never painted out Marley's name on the sign. Years afterward it still hung above the door: *Scrooge and Marley*. Sometimes people called Scrooge "Scrooge," and sometimes

“Marley.” He answered to both names. It was all the same to him.

Scrooge was a very tightfisted man! He was secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features and nipped his pointed nose. It shriveled his cheeks and stiffened his walk. It made his eyes red and his thin lips blue. The hair on his head, eyebrows, and chin was frosty white. He seemed to carry his own low temperature with him. He iced his coffee in the summer, and didn’t thaw it one degree at Christmas.

Outside heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No sun could warm him; no winter weather could chill him. No wind that blew was more bitter than he. No falling snow was colder. No pelting rain was less open to mercy. The heaviest rain, snow, hail, and sleet had only one advantage over him. They often “came down” handsomely—but Scrooge never did.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, “My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?” No beggars asked him for anything. No children asked him

what time it was. No man or woman ever asked him directions. Even the blind men's dogs seemed to know him. When they saw him coming, they would tug their owners into doorways. Then they would wag their tails as if to say, "No eye at all is better than an evil eye, master!"

But what did Scrooge care! This was the very thing he liked.

One Christmas Eve, old Scrooge was busy in his counting house. It was cold, dark, biting weather. He could hear the people outside, stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them. The city clocks said it was 3:00 P.M., but it was quite dark already. It had not been light all day. Candles were flaring in the windows of the nearby offices. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole. It was so dense outside that, even though the street was very narrow, the houses on the other side were hard to see.

The door of Scrooge's office was open so he could keep an eye on his clerk. In a dismal little cell beyond, the clerk was copying letters. Scrooge had a small fire in his own fireplace.

The clerk's tiny fire was so much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't add to it, for Scrooge kept the coal box in his own room. The clerk had put on his white comforter and tried to warm himself at the candle. Not being a man of a strong imagination, he failed.

"A merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you!" cried a cheerful voice. It was Scrooge's nephew, who had just come in.

"Bah!" said Scrooge. "Humbug!"

Fred, Scrooge's nephew, was all in a glow from walking in the fog and frost. His face was ruddy and handsome. His eyes sparkled.

"Christmas a humbug, Uncle?" said the nephew. "You don't mean that, I am sure!"

"I *do*," said Scrooge. "Merry Christmas? Why be so merry? You're poor enough."

"Come, then," laughed the nephew. "Why be so dismal? You're rich enough."

Scrooge had no better answer than to say, "Bah!" again and then "Humbug!"

"Don't be cross, Uncle!"

"What else can I be," returned the uncle, "when I live in such a world of fools? Merry

Christmas! What's Christmas to you but a time for paying bills without money? You find yourself a year older, but not an hour richer. If I had my way, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips would be boiled with his own pudding. Then he ought to be buried with a stake of holly through his heart!"

"Uncle!" pleaded the nephew.

"Fred! Keep Christmas in your own way. Let me keep it in mine."

"But you *don't* keep it."

"Allow me to leave it alone, then," said Scrooge. "Much good it may do *you*!"

"I have gotten some good from many things by which I have not made money," said the nephew. "Christmas is one of those. It is always a good time—a kind, forgiving, pleasant time. It is the only time I know that men and women seem to open their hearts freely. Maybe it has never put any gold or silver in my pocket. But Christmas has always done me good, and *will* do me good. So I say, God bless it! Please don't be so glum, Uncle. Come! Dine with us tomorrow."



“Yes, you have a wife now, don’t you?” Scrooge asked in a grumpy voice. “Why did you get married?”

“Because I fell in love.”

“Because you fell in love!” growled Scrooge. He spoke as if that were the only thing in the world more ridiculous than a merry Christmas.

“You never visited before I got married. Why use it as a reason for not coming now?”

“Good afternoon,” said Scrooge.

“I am sorry, with all my heart, that you won’t join us. But I have come in honor of

Christmas—and I'll keep my Christmas humor to the last. A Merry Christmas to you, Uncle!”

“*Good afternoon!*” barked Scrooge.

At that, his nephew left the room. He stopped to say Merry Christmas to the clerk. Cold as he was, the clerk was warmer than Scrooge, for he said Merry Christmas back.

“There’s another one,” muttered Scrooge to himself. “My clerk, with 15 shillings a week, and a large family. Even *he* is talking about a merry Christmas. They’re all crazy!”

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The Day Gets Colder

After Scrooge's nephew left, two other men came in. They 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, looking at his list. "Tell me, sir—am I addressing Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley?"

"Mr. Marley has been dead these seven years," Scrooge said. "He died seven years ago this very night."

"Ah, well, Mr. Scrooge, then," said the gentleman, taking up a pen. "It is good to help the poor. They suffer greatly in this festive season. Many cannot meet their needs. Hundreds of thousands do not have common comforts, sir."

"Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.

“Plenty of prisons,” said the gentleman, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

“And the workhouses? I trust they are still open?”

“They’re very busy,” said the gentleman. “I wish I could say they were not.”

“Oh! From what you said at first, I was afraid that something had happened to close them,” snapped Scrooge. “I’m glad to hear they’re still open.”

“Well, they do not supply Christmas cheer of mind or body to the poor,” returned the gentleman. “That is why a few of us are trying to raise money. We want to buy the poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. Christmas is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Plenty 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 prisons and workhouses—they cost enough. Those who are

hungry and cold can go there.”

“But sir—many *can't* go there. And many would rather die!”

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it! It would decrease the surplus population. Besides, it’s none of my business. It’s quite enough for a man to understand his own business and not to interfere with other people’s. Mine occupies me constantly. Good afternoon, gentlemen!”

Seeing that it would be useless to argue, the gentlemen left. Scrooge got back to work. He now had an improved opinion of himself and was in a better mood than usual.

Meanwhile, the fog thickened. The ancient church tower became invisible. Striking the hours and quarter-hours in the clouds, its bell vibrated afterward as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen head. The cold became intense. In the main street, men working on the gas pipes had lighted a great fire. A party of ragged men and boys had gathered around it to warm their hands. In bright shop windows, holly sprigs and berries crackled in the fire’s heat.

The whole town was getting ready for

Christmas. The Lord Mayor gave orders to his 50 cooks and butlers to keep Christmas as a Lord Mayor's household should. Even the little tailor stirred up tomorrow's pudding in his attic room, while his lean wife and the baby went out to buy the beef.

It got foggier yet, and colder. Yet cold as it was, one boy stooped down at Scrooge's keyhole to sing a Christmas carol. At the first note, Scrooge seized a ruler and struck the door. The young singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and frost.

At last the hour of shutting up the counting house arrived. With ill will, Scrooge got off his stool and nodded to his clerk. Right away, the clerk snuffed out his candle and put on his hat.

"You'll want all day tomorrow, I suppose?" barked Scrooge.

"If that's all right, sir."

"It's *not* all right—and it's not fair," said Scrooge. "If I were to pay no wages for the time, you'd feel ill used, wouldn't you?"

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 said it was only once a year.

"A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every 25th of December!" said Scrooge. "But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here early the next morning."

As the clerk promised that he would, Scrooge walked out with a growl. The office was closed in a twinkling, and the clerk headed home to be with his family.

Scrooge had a lonely dinner at a nearby tavern and read the newspapers. Then he went home to go to bed.

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Scrooge is downright mean and cold-hearted—the stingiest man in all of London. Could anything on earth transform him into a kind and caring human being? Probably not. But the Spirit of Christmas is very powerful—more powerful by far than anything on earth.

 **SADDLEBACK**
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING
www.sdlback.com

LEXILE HL500L

ISBN: 978-1-61651-073-2



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