

A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

Episode 2: Meeting with Marley



A Christmas Carol...

...by Charles Dickens.

Episode 2...*Meeting with Marley.*

Jacob Marley. The same face: the very same. Marley in his pigtail, usual waistcoat and boots. The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks and heavy purses wrought in steel. His body was transparent; so that Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind.

Though Scrooge looked the phantom through and through, and saw it standing before him; though he felt the chilling influence of its death-cold eyes and marked the very texture of the folded handkerchief bound about its head and chin (which he'd not observed before) he was still incredulous, and fought against his senses.

'How now!' he said, caustic and cold as ever. 'What do you want with me?'

'Much!' - Marley's voice, no doubt about it.

'Who are you?' asked Scrooge.

'Ask me who I was' stated the ghost.

'Who were you then?' said Scrooge, raising his voice.

'In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley.'

'Can you - can you sit down?' asked Scrooge, looking doubtfully at him.

'I can.'

'Do it then,' asked Scrooge.

Scrooge asked the question, because he didn't know whether a ghost so transparent might be able to take to a chair, and felt that in the event of its being impossible, it might involve the necessity of an embarrassing explanation. But the ghost sat down on the opposite side of the fireplace, as if he were quite used to it.

'You don't believe in me,' observed the Ghost.

'I don't,' said Scrooge.

'What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?' continued the ghost.

'I don't know,' said Scrooge.

'Why do you doubt your senses?' asked the ghost.

'Because,' said Scrooge, 'a little thing may affect them. A slight disorder of the stomach. You might be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!'

Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking jokes, nor did he feel, in his heart, by any means waggish then. The truth is, that he tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror, for the spectre's voice disturbed the very marrow in his bones.

'You see this toothpick?' said Scrooge, returning quickly to his point and wishing, though it were only for a second, to divert the vision's stony gaze from himself.

'I do,' replied the Ghost.

'You're not looking at it,' said Scrooge.

But I see it,' said the Ghost

'Well!' returned Scrooge, 'I have but to swallow this, and be for the rest of my days persecuted by a legion of goblins, all of my own creation. Humbug, I tell you; humbug!'

At this the spirit raised a frightful cry, and shook its chain with such a dismal and appalling noise, that Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself from falling in a swoon. But how much greater was his horror, when the phantom, taking off the bandage round its head - as if it were too warm to wear indoors - its lower jaw dropped down upon its chest!

Scrooge fell upon his knees, and clasped his hands before his face.

'Mercy!' he said. 'Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me?'

'Do you believe in me or not?' replied the Ghost.

'I do! I must. But why do spirits walk the earth, and why do they come to me?'

'It is required of every man,' the Ghost returned, 'that the spirit within him should walk among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!'

Again the spectre raised a cry, and shook its chain, and wrung its shadowy hands.

'You are chained,' said Scrooge, trembling. 'Tell me why?'

'I wear the chain I forged in life,' replied the Ghost. 'I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on 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.

'Or would you know the weight and length of the chain you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!'

Scrooge glanced about him on the floor, in the expectation of finding himself surrounded by some fifty or sixty fathoms of iron cable: but he could see nothing.

'Jacob,' he said, imploringly. 'Tell me more. Speak comfort to me, Jacob.'

'I have none to give,' the Ghost replied. 'Comfort comes from other regions, Ebenezer Scrooge, and is conveyed to other kinds of men. Nor can I tell you what I would. A very little more, is all that is permitted to me. I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere. In life my spirit never walked beyond our counting-house - and now weary journeys lie before me!'

It was a habit with Scrooge, whenever he became thoughtful, to put his hands in his breeches pockets. Pondering what the Ghost had said, he did so now, but without lifting up his eyes, or getting off his knees.

'You must have been very slow about it, Jacob,' Scrooge observed, in a business-like manner, though with humility and deference.

'Slow!' the Ghost repeated.

'Seven years dead,' mused Scrooge. 'And travelling all that time?'

'The whole time,' said the Ghost. 'No rest, no peace. Incessant torture of remorse.'

'You travel fast?' said Scrooge.

'On the wings of the wind,' replied the Ghost.

'You might have got over a great quantity of ground in seven years,' said Scrooge.

The Ghost, on hearing this, set up another cry, and clanked its chain hideously in the dead silence of the night.

'Oh! captive, bound, and double-ironed,' cried the phantom, 'and not to know that any space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!'

'But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,' faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

'Business!' cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. 'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, benevolence were my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!'

It held up its chain at arm's length, as if it were the cause of all its unavailing grief, and flung it heavily upon the ground again.

'This is the time of year I suffer most,' the spectre said. 'Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed star which led the wise men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have led me!'

Scrooge was very much dismayed to hear the spectre going on at this rate, and he began to quake exceedingly.

'Hear me!' cried the Ghost. 'My time is nearly gone.'

'I will,' said Scrooge. 'But don't be hard upon me, Jacob!'

'How it is that I appear before you in a shape that you can see, I may not tell. I have sat invisible beside you many and many a day.'

It was not an agreeable idea. Scrooge shivered, and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

'That is no light part of my penance,' pursued the Ghost. 'I am here to-night to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate. A chance and hope of my procuring, Ebenezer.'

'You were always a good friend to me,' said Scrooge. 'Thank'ee!'

'You will be haunted,' resumed the Ghost, 'by Three Spirits.'

Scrooge's countenance fell almost as low as the Ghost's had done.

'Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?' he demanded, in a faltering voice.

'It is.'

'I - I think I'd rather not,' said Scrooge.

'Without their visits you cannot hope to shun the path I tread. Expect the first to-morrow, when the bell tolls one.'

'Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it all over, Jacob?' hinted Scrooge.

'Expect the second on the next night at the same hour. The third upon the next night when the last stroke of twelve has ceased to vibrate. Look to see me no more; and look that, for your own sake, you remember what has passed between us.'

When it had said these words, the spectre took its handkerchief from the table, and bound it round its head, as before. Scrooge knew this by the smart sound its teeth made, when the jaws were brought together by the bandage. He ventured to raise his eyes again, and found his supernatural visitor confronting him in an upright posture, with its chain wound over and about its arm.

The apparition walked backward from him; and at every step it took, the window raised itself a little, so that when the spectre reached it, it was wide open.

It beckoned Scrooge to approach, which he did. When they were within two paces of each other, Marley's Ghost held up its hand, warning him to come no nearer. Scrooge stopped.

Not so much in obedience, as in surprise and fear: for on the raising of the hand, he became sensible of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret; wailings inexpressibly sorrowful. The spectre, after listening for a moment, joined in the mournful dirge; and floated out upon the bleak, dark night.

Scrooge followed to the window: desperate in his curiosity. He looked out.

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few were linked together; none were free. Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He'd been quite familiar with one old ghost, in a white waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to its ankle. It cried piteously at being unable to assist a wretched woman with an infant, whom it saw below, upon a door-step. The misery with them all was clearly, that they sought to interfere for good in human matters...and had lost the power for ever.

Whether these creatures faded into mist, or mist enshrouded them, he could not tell. But they and their spirit voices faded together; and the night became as it had been when he walked home.

Scrooge closed the window, and examined the door by which the Ghost had entered. It was still locked, as he had locked it with his own hands, and the bolts were undisturbed. He tried to say 'Humbug!' but stopped at the first syllable. Whether from the emotion he'd undergone...or the fatigues of the day...or the conversation of the Ghost...or the lateness of the hour, he was much in need of rest. He went straight to bed, without undressing, and fell asleep upon the instant.