

A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

Episode 3: The first of the three spirits



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When Scrooge awoke it was so dark that, looking out of bed, he could scarcely distinguish the window from the walls of his chamber. He was endeavouring to pierce the darkness when the chimes of a neighbouring church struck the four quarters. So he listened for the hour.

To his great astonishment the heavy bell went on from six to seven, and from seven to eight, and regularly up to twelve; then stopped. Twelve! It was past two when he went to bed.

'Why, it isn't possible,' said Scrooge, 'that I can have slept through a whole day and far into another night.' He scrambled out of bed, and groped his way to the window. All he could make out was that it was still very foggy and extremely cold.

He went over to bed again and thought, and thought, and thought it over and over - and could make nothing of it. Every time he resolved within himself that it was all a dream, his mind flew back to its first position and presented the same problem to be worked all through, 'Was it a dream or not?'

Scrooge lay in this state until the chime had gone three quarters more, when he remembered that the Ghost had warned him of a visitation when the bell tolled one. He resolved to lie awake until the hour was past; and, considering that he could not go to sleep, this was perhaps the wisest resolution in his power.

The quarter hour was so long, that he was more than once convinced he must have sunk into a doze and missed the clock. At length it broke upon his listening ear.

'Ding, dong!'

'A quarter past,' said Scrooge, counting.

'Ding, dong!'

'Half past!' said Scrooge.

'Ding, dong!'

'A quarter to it,' said Scrooge.

'Ding, dong!'

'The hour itself,' said Scrooge, triumphantly, 'and nothing else!'

He spoke before the hour bell sounded, which it now did with a deep, dull, hollow, melancholy one. Light flashed up in the room upon the instant, and the curtains of his bed were drawn aside by a hand and Scrooge, starting up, found himself face to face with an unearthly visitor.

It was a strange figure - like a child, yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having diminished to a child's proportions. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it. It wore a tunic of the purest white and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It held a branch of fresh green holly in its hand. But the strangest thing about it was, that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light, by which all this was visible.

'Are you the Spirit, sir, whose coming was foretold to me?'
asked Scrooge.

'I am!'

The voice was soft and gentle, as if, instead of being so close
beside him, it were at a distance.

'Who...and what are you?' Scrooge demanded.

'I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.'

'Long past?' inquired Scrooge.

'No. Your past.'

Scrooge then made bold to inquire what business brought him
there.

'Your welfare!' said the Ghost.

Scrooge expressed himself much obliged, but could not help
thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more
conducive to that end. The Spirit must have heard him
thinking, for it said immediately:

'Your reclamation, then. Take heed!'

It put out its hand as it spoke, and clasped Scrooge gently by
the arm.

'Rise! and walk with me!'

It would have been in vain for Scrooge to plead that the bed
was warm and the thermometer a long way below freezing; the
grasp, though gentle as a woman's hand, was not to be
resisted. Scrooge rose: but finding that the Spirit made towards
the window, clasped its robe in supplication.

'I am mortal,' Scrooge remonstrated, 'and liable to fall.'

'Let me touch my hand there,' said the Spirit, laying it upon his heart, 'and you shall be upheld!'

As the words were spoken, they passed through the wall...and stood upon an open country road, with fields on either side. The city had entirely vanished. The darkness and the mist had vanished with it, for it was a clear, cold, winter day, with snow upon the ground. 'Good Heaven!' said Scrooge, clasping his hands together, as he looked about him. 'I know this place. I was a boy here!'

Scrooge was conscious of a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares long, long, forgotten.

'Your lip is trembling,' said the Ghost.

Scrooge muttered, and begged the Ghost to lead him where he would.

'You recollect the way?' inquired the Spirit.

'Remember it!' cried Scrooge with fervour; 'I could walk it blindfold.'

'Strange to have forgotten it for so many years!' observed the Ghost. 'Let us go on.'

They walked along the road; Scrooge recognising every gate, and post, and tree; until a little market-town appeared in the distance, with its bridge, its church, and winding river. Some shaggy ponies now were seen trotting towards them with boys upon their backs, who called to other boys in carts driven by farmers. All these boys were in great spirits, and shouted to each other, until the broad fields were so full of merry music, that the crisp air laughed to hear it.

'These are but shadows of the things that have been,' said the Ghost. 'They have no consciousness of us.'

The merry travellers came on; and as they came, Scrooge knew and named them every one. Why was he rejoiced beyond all bounds to see them! Why did his cold eye glisten, and his heart leap as they went past! Why was he filled with gladness when he heard them give each other Merry Christmas, as they parted at cross-roads and bye-ways, for their several homes! What was merry Christmas to Scrooge? What good had it ever done to him?

'The school is not quite deserted,' said the Ghost. 'A solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still.'

Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed.

They left the high-road, by a well-remembered lane, and soon approached a mansion of dull red brick. It was a large house, but one of broken fortunes; for the spacious rooms were little used, their walls were damp and mossy, their windows broken, and their gates decayed. Entering the dreary hall, and glancing through the open doors of many rooms, they found them poorly furnished, cold, and vast. There was an earthy smell in the air, a chilly bareness in the place, which associated itself somehow with too much getting up by candlelight, and not too much to eat.

They went, the Ghost and Scrooge, across the hall, to a door at the back of the house. It opened before them, and disclosed a long, bare, melancholy room, made barer still by lines of plain benches and desks. At one of these a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down upon a bench, and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he used to be.

The Spirit touched him on the arm, and pointed to his younger self, intent upon his reading. Suddenly a man, in foreign garments, wonderfully real and distinct to look at, stood outside the window, with an axe stuck in his belt, and leading an ass laden with wood by the bridle.

‘Why, it’s Ali Baba!’ Scrooge exclaimed in ecstasy. ‘It’s dear old honest Ali Baba! Yes, yes, I know! One Christmas time, when this solitary child was left here all alone, he did come, just like that. And Valentine,’ said Scrooge, ‘and his wild brother, Orson; there they go!’

To hear Scrooge expending all the earnestness of his nature on such subjects, in a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and to see his heightened and excited face; would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed.

Then, with a rapidity of transition very foreign to his usual character, he said, in pity for his former self, ‘Poor boy!’ and cried again.

‘I wish,’ Scrooge muttered, putting his hand in his pocket, and looking about him, after drying his eyes with his cuff: ‘but it’s too late now.’

‘What’s the matter?’ asked the Spirit.

‘Nothing,’ said Scrooge. ‘Nothing. There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something: that’s all.’

The Ghost smiled thoughtfully, and waved its hand: saying as it did so, ‘Let us see another Christmas!’

Scrooge's former self grew larger at the words, and the room became a little darker and more dirty. The panels shrunk, the windows cracked and fragments of plaster fell out of the ceiling. But how all this was brought about, Scrooge knew not. He only knew that there he was, alone again, when all the other boys had gone home for the jolly holidays.

He was not reading now, but walking up and down despairingly. Scrooge looked at the Ghost, and with a mournful shaking of his head, glanced anxiously towards the door.

It opened; and a little girl, much younger than the boy, came darting in, and putting her arms about his neck, and often kissing him, addressed him as her 'Dear, dear brother.'

'I have come to bring you home, dear brother!' said the child, clapping her tiny hands, and bending down to laugh. 'To bring you home, home, home!'

'Home, little Fan?' returned the boy.

'Yes!' said the child, brimful of glee. 'Home, for good and all. Home, for ever and ever. Father is so much kinder than he used to be. He spoke so gently to me one dear night when I was going to bed, that I was not afraid to ask him once more if you might come home; and he said Yes, you should; and sent me in a coach to bring you. And you're to be a man!' said the child, opening her eyes, 'and you are never to come back here; but first, we're to be together all Christmas long, and have the merriest time in all the world.'

She clapped her hands and laughed, and tried to touch his head; but being too little, laughed again, and stood on tiptoe to embrace him. Then she began to drag him, in her childish eagerness, towards the door.

A voice in the hall cried. 'Bring down Master Scrooge's box, there!' and in the hall appeared the schoolmaster himself, who showed young Scrooge and his sister into the parlour. Here he produced a decanter of curiously light wine, and a block of curiously heavy cake and, at the same time, sent out a servant to offer a glass of something to the postboy.

Master Scrooge's trunk being by this time tied to the top of the coach, the children bade the schoolmaster good-bye right willingly; and getting into it, drove gaily down the garden-sweep, the quick wheels dashing the frost and snow from the dark leaves of the evergreens like spray.

'Always a delicate creature, your sister,' said the Ghost. 'But she had a large heart!'

'So she had!' cried Scrooge. 'You're right, I will not deny it!'

'She died a woman,' said the Ghost, 'and had, as I think, children.'

'One child,' Scrooge returned.

'True,' said the Ghost. 'Your nephew!'

Scrooge seemed uneasy in his mind; and answered briefly, 'Yes.'