

A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

Episode 4: Master Fezziwig



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Although Scrooge and the Ghost had but that moment left the school behind them, they were now in the streets of a busy city, where shadowy passengers passed and shadowy carts and coaches battled for the way. It was plain enough that here too it was Christmas time again; but it was evening, and the streets were lighted up.

The Ghost stopped at a certain warehouse door, and asked Scrooge if he knew it.

'Know it!' said Scrooge. 'I was an apprentice here!'

They went in. At the sight of an old gentleman in a wig, sitting behind such a high desk, that if he'd been two inches taller he must have knocked his head against the ceiling, Scrooge cried in great excitement:

'Why, it's old Fezziwig! Bless his heart; it's Fezziwig alive again!'

Old Fezziwig laid down his pen, and looked up at the clock, which pointed to the hour of seven. He rubbed his hands, adjusted his capacious waistcoat, and called out in a jovial voice:

'Yo ho, there! Ebenezer! Dick!'

Scrooge's former self, now grown a young man, came briskly in, accompanied by his fellow apprentice, Dick.

'Dick Wilkins, to be sure!' said Scrooge to the Ghost. 'Bless me, yes. There he is. He was very much attached to me, was Dick. Poor Dick! Dear, dear!'

'Yo ho, my boys!' said Fezziwig. 'No more work to-night. Christmas Eve, Dick. Christmas, Ebenezer! Clear away, my lads, and let's have lots of room here! Hilli-ho, Dick! Chirrup, Ebenezer!'

Clear away! It was done in a minute. Every movable was packed off; the floor was swept and fuel was heaped upon the fire. The warehouse was as snug and bright a ball-room, as you could desire to see upon a winter's night.

In came a fiddler with a music-book. In came Mrs. Fezziwig, one vast substantial smile. In came the three Miss Fezziwigs, beaming and lovable. In came all the young men and women employed in the business. In came the housemaid, with her cousin, the baker. In came the cook, with her brother's friend, the milkman. In they all came, one after another; some shyly, some boldly, some gracefully, some awkwardly, some pushing, some pulling; in they all came, anyhow and everyhow. And away they all went, twenty couples at once; hands half round and back again the other way; down the middle and up again.

Old Fezziwig cried out, 'Well done!' and the fiddler began again and there were more dances, and there were games, and more dances, and then there was cake, and there was a great Cold Roast, and there were mince-pies, and plenty of beer. But the great effect of the evening came when Old Fezziwig stood out to dance with Mrs. Fezziwig. And when old Fezziwig and Mrs. Fezziwig had gone all through the dance - advance and retire, hold hands with your partner, bow and curtsy, corkscrew, thread-the-needle, and back again to your place - Fezziwig cut so deftly, that he appeared to wink with his legs, and came upon his feet again without a stagger.

When the clock struck eleven, this domestic ball broke up. Mr and Mrs Fezziwig took their stations, one on either side of the door, and shaking hands with every person individually as he or she went out, wished him or her a Merry Christmas. When everybody had retired but the two apprentices, they did the same to them; and thus the cheerful voices died away, and the lads were left to their beds.

During the whole of this time, Scrooge had acted like a man out of his wits. His heart and soul were in the scene and with his former self. He remembered everything and enjoyed everything. It was not until now, when the bright faces of his former self and Dick were turned from them, that he remembered the Ghost, and became conscious that it was looking full upon him, while the light upon its head burnt very clear.

‘A small matter,’ said the Ghost, ‘to make these silly folks so full of gratitude.’

‘Small!’ echoed Scrooge.

The Spirit signed to him to listen to the two apprentices, who were pouring out their hearts in praise of Fezziwig. And when Scrooge had done so, the Spirit said:

‘Why! Is it not? He’s spent but a few pounds of your mortal money; three or four perhaps. Is that so much that he deserves this praise?’

‘It isn’t that,’ said Scrooge, heated by the remark, and speaking unconsciously like his former, not his latter, self. ‘It isn’t that, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. The happiness he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune.’

He felt the Spirit’s glance, and stopped.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked the Ghost.

'Nothing particular,' said Scrooge.

'Something, I think?' the Ghost insisted.

'No,' said Scrooge, 'No. I should like to be able to say a word or two to my clerk, Bob Cratchit, just now! That's all.'

Scrooge's former self turned down the lamps and Scrooge and the Ghost again stood side by side in the open air.

'My time grows short,' observed the Spirit. 'Quick!'

This was not addressed to Scrooge, or to any one whom he could see, but it produced an immediate effect. For again Scrooge saw himself. He was older now; a man in the prime of his life. His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years, but there was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root.

He was not alone, but sat by the side of a fair young woman, in whose eyes there were tears, which sparkled in the light that shone out of the Ghost of Christmas Past.

'It matters little,' she said, softly. 'To you, very little. Another idol has displaced me; and if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, I've no just cause to grieve.'

'What idol has displaced you?' he asked.

'A golden one: the pursuit of wealth! I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you.'

'What then?' he retorted. 'Even if I've grown so much wiser, what then? I am not changed towards you.'

She shook her head.

'Am I?' he asked.

'Our engagement is an old one,' she said. 'It was made when we were both poor and content to be so. You are changed. When it was made, you were another man.'

'Have I ever sought release?' he asked.

'In words. No. Never,' she said.

'In what, then?'

'In a changed nature; in an altered spirit. In everything that made my love of any worth or value in your sight. If this had never been between us,' she said, looking mildly, but with steadiness, upon him, 'tell me, would you seek me out and try to win me now?'

He seemed to yield to the justice of this, in spite of himself. But he said with a struggle, 'You think not.'

'I would gladly think otherwise if I could,' she answered, 'Heaven knows! But if you were free today, tomorrow, yesterday, can even I believe that you would choose a girl without a dowry - you who weigh everything by Gain. I release you. With a full heart, for the love of him you once were.'

He was about to speak; but with her head turned from him, she resumed.

'You may have pain in this now. But a very brief time from now and you will dismiss the recollection of it, gladly, as an unprofitable dream, from which it happened well that you awoke. May you be happy in the life you've chosen!'

She left him, and they parted.

'Spirit!' said Scrooge, 'show me no more! Conduct me home. Why do you delight to torture me?'

'One shadow more!' exclaimed the Ghost.

'No more!' cried Scrooge. 'No more. I don't wish to see it. Show me no more!'

But the relentless Ghost pinioned him in both his arms, and forced him to observe what happened next.

They were in another scene and place; a room, not very large or handsome, but full of comfort. Near to the winter fire sat a beautiful young girl, so like that last that Scrooge believed it was the same, until he saw her, now grown older, sitting opposite her daughter. The noise in this room was perfectly tumultuous, for there were more children there than Scrooge in his agitated state of mind could count, and every child was conducting itself like forty. The consequences were uproarious beyond belief; but no one seemed to care; on the contrary, the mother and daughter laughed heartily, and enjoyed it very much.

Now a knocking at the door was heard, and such a rush immediately ensued that the daughter with a laughing face was borne towards it at the centre of a flushed and boisterous group, just in time to greet the father, who came home attended by a man laden with Christmas toys and presents. Then the shouting and the struggling, and the onslaught that was made on the defenceless porter! The scaling him, with chairs for ladders, to dive into his pockets, and despoil him of brown-paper parcels, hold on tight by his cravat, hug him round the neck, pommel his back, and kick his legs in irrepressible affection! The shouts of wonder and delight with which the development of every package was received! The joy, and gratitude, and ecstasy! They are all indescribable. It's enough that by degrees the children got out of the parlour, and by one stair at a time, up to the top of the house; where they went to bed.

And now Scrooge looked on more attentively than ever, when the master of the house, having his daughter leaning fondly on him, sat down with her and her mother at his own fireside; and when he thought that such another creature, quite as graceful and as full of promise, might have called him father, and been a spring-time in the winter of his life, his sight grew very dim indeed.

'I saw an old friend of yours this afternoon,' said the husband, turning to his wife with a smile.

'Who was it?' she enquired.

'Guess!'

'How can I? I don't I know,' she added in the same breath, laughing as he laughed. 'Mr Scrooge?'

'Mr Scrooge it was!' said her husband. 'I passed his office window and as it was not shut up, and because he had a candle inside, I could scarcely help seeing him. His partner lies upon the point of death, I hear, and there he sat alone. Quite alone in the world, I do believe.'

'Spirit!' said Scrooge in a broken voice, 'remove me from this place.'

'I told you these were shadows of the things that have been,' said the Ghost. 'That they are what they are, do not blame me!'

'Remove me!' Scrooge exclaimed, 'I cannot bear it!'

He turned upon the Ghost, and began to wrestle with it.

'Leave me! Take me back. Haunt me no longer!'

In the struggle Scrooge was conscious of being exhausted, and overcome by an irresistible drowsiness. He relaxed, and had barely time to reel to bed, before he sank into a heavy sleep.