

A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

Episode 6: Scrooge's nephew



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By this time it was getting dark, and snowing pretty heavily; and as Scrooge and the Spirit went along the streets, the brightness of all the roaring fires in kitchens, parlours, and all sorts of rooms, was wonderful. Here, the flickering of the blaze showed preparations for a cosy dinner and curtains, ready to be drawn to shut out cold and darkness. There all the children of the house were running out into the snow to meet their married sisters, brothers, cousins, uncles, aunts, and be the first to greet them. If you had judged from the numbers of people on their way to friendly gatherings, you might have thought that no one was at home to give them welcome when they got there.

How the Ghost exulted! How it poured its bright and harmless mirth on everything within its reach!

And now, without a word of warning from the Ghost, they stood upon a bleak moor, where nothing grew but moss and furze, and coarse, rank grass. Down in the west the setting sun had left a streak of fiery red, which glared upon the desolation for an instant, like a sullen eye, and frowning lower, lower, lower, was lost in the thick gloom of darkest night.

'What place is this?' asked Scrooge.

'A place where Miners live, who labour in the bowels of the earth,' returned the Spirit. 'But they know me. See!'

A light shone from the window of a hut, and swiftly they advanced towards it. Passing through the wall of mud and stone, they found a cheerful company assembled around a glowing fire. An old, old man and woman, with their children and their children's children, and another generation beyond that, all decked out gaily in their holiday attire. The old man, in a voice that seldom rose above the howling of the wind, was singing them a Christmas song, and from time to time they all joined in the chorus.

The Spirit did not tarry here, but bade Scrooge hold his robe, and passing on above the moor, sped towards the sea. To Scrooge's horror, looking back, he saw the last of the land behind them, and his ears were deafened by the thundering of water, as it rolled, and roared, and raged.

Built upon a reef of sunken rocks, there stood a solitary lighthouse. Great heaps of sea-weed clung to its base, and storm-birds rose and fell about it, like the waves they skimmed.

But even here, the two men who watched the lighthouse light had made a fire, that shed out a ray of brightness on the awful sea. Joining their hands over the rough table at which they sat, they wished each other Merry Christmas, and one of them, with his face all damaged and scarred with hard weather - as the figure-head of an old ship might be - struck up a sturdy song that was like a Gale in itself.

Again the Ghost sped on, above the black and heaving sea - on, on - until, being far away, as he told Scrooge, from any shore, they lighted on a ship. They stood beside the helmsman at the wheel, the look-out in the bow, the officers on watch; dark, ghostly figures. But every man among them hummed a Christmas tune, or had a Christmas thought, or spoke below his breath to his companion of some bygone Christmas Day. And every man on board had remembered those he cared for at a distance, and had known that they delighted to remember him.

It was a great surprise to Scrooge, while listening to the moaning of the wind, to hear a hearty laugh. It was a much greater surprise to Scrooge to recognise it as his own nephew's and to find himself in a bright, gleaming room, with the Spirit standing smiling by his side, and looking at that same nephew with approving affability!

'Ha, ha!' laughed Scrooge's nephew. 'Ha, ha, ha!'

If you should happen, by any unlikely chance, to know a man more blest in a laugh than Scrooge's nephew, all I can say is, I should like to know him too. Introduce him to me, and I'll cultivate his acquaintance. There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good-humour. When Scrooge's nephew laughed in this way, holding his sides, rolling his head, and twisting his face into the most extravagant contortions, Scrooge's niece, by marriage, laughed as heartily as he. And their assembled friends roared out lustily.

'Ha, ha! He said that Christmas was humbug, as I live!' cried Scrooge's nephew. 'He believed it too!'

'More shame for him, Fred!' said Scrooge's niece, indignantly.

'He's a comical old fellow,' said Scrooge's nephew, 'that's the truth: and not so pleasant as he might be. However, his offences carry their own punishment, and I have nothing to say against him.'

'I'm sure he's very rich, Fred,' hinted Scrooge's niece. 'At least you always tell me so.'

'What of that, my dear!' said Scrooge's nephew. 'His wealth is of no use to him. He doesn't do any good with it!'

'I have no patience with him,' observed Scrooge's niece. Scrooge's niece's sisters, and all the other ladies, expressed the same opinion.

'Oh, I have!' said Scrooge's nephew. 'I am sorry for him; I couldn't be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers by his ill whims? Himself, always. He takes it into his head to dislike us, and he won't come and dine with us. What's the consequence? He doesn't lose much of a dinner.'

'Indeed, I think he loses a very good dinner,' interrupted Scrooge's niece. Everybody else said the same, and they must be allowed to have been competent judges, because they had just had dinner.

'Well! I'm very glad to hear it,' said Scrooge's nephew. 'I just wish to say that the consequence of his taking a dislike to us, and not making merry with us, is, as I think, that he loses some pleasant moments, which could do him no harm. I mean to give him the same chance every year, whether he likes it or not, for I pity him. He may rail at Christmas till he dies, but he can't help thinking better of it - I defy him - if he finds me going there, in good temper, year after year, and saying Uncle Scrooge, how are you? If it only puts him in the mood to leave his poor clerk fifty pounds, **that's** something.'

After tea, they had some music, for they were a musical family. Scrooge's niece played well upon the harp, and played among other things a simple little tune which had been familiar to the child who fetched Scrooge from the boarding-school, as he had been reminded by the Ghost of Christmas Past. When this strain of music sounded, all the things that Ghost had shown him, came upon his mind; he softened more and more; and thought that if he could have listened to it often, years ago, he might have cultivated the kindness of life for his own happiness.

But they didn't devote the whole evening to music. After a while they played at forfeits. There might have been twenty people there, young and old, but they all played, and so did Scrooge; for, wholly forgetting what was going on and that his voice made no sound in their ears, he sometimes came out with his guess quite loud, and very often guessed quite right, too; for the sharpest needle, was not sharper than Scrooge.

The Ghost was greatly pleased to find him in this mood, and looked upon him so kindly, that Scrooge begged like a boy to be allowed to stay until the guests departed. But this the Spirit said could not be done.

'Here's a new game,' said Scrooge. 'One half hour, Spirit, only one!'

It was a Game called 'Yes and No', where Scrooge's nephew had to think of something, and the rest must find out what it was; he only answering to their questions 'yes' or 'no', as the case was.

The brisk fire of questioning to which he was exposed, elicited from him that he was thinking of an animal, a live animal, rather a disagreeable animal, a savage animal, an animal that growled and grunted sometimes, and talked sometimes, and lived in London, and walked about the streets, and was not a horse, or an ass, or a cow, or a bull, or a tiger, or a dog, or a pig, or a cat, or a bear. At every fresh question that was put to him, his nephew burst into a fresh roar of laughter; and was so inexpressibly tickled, that he was obliged to get up off the sofa and stamp. At last someone cried out:

'I've found it out! I know what it is, Fred! I know what it is!'

'What is it?' cried Fred.

'It's your Uncle Scro-o-o-o-oge!'

It certainly was...though some objected that the reply to 'Is it a bear?' ought to have been 'Yes', inasmuch as an answer in the negative was sufficient to have diverted their thoughts from Mr Scrooge.

'He's given us plenty of merriment, I am sure,' said Fred, 'and it would be ungrateful not to drink his health. Here is a glass of mulled wine and I say, 'Uncle Scrooge!'

'Well! Uncle Scrooge.' they cried.

'A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to the old man, wherever he is!' said Scrooge's nephew.

Scrooge had become so gay and light of heart that he would have toasted the unconscious company in return, and thanked them in an inaudible speech, if the Ghost had given him time. But the whole scene passed off in the breath of the last word spoken by his nephew; and he and the Spirit were again upon their travels.

Much they saw, and far they went, and many homes they visited, but always with a happy end. The Spirit stood beside sick beds, and they were cheerful; by struggling men, and they were patient in their greater hope; by poverty, and it was rich. In almshouse, hospital, and jail, in misery's every refuge, where vain man had not made fast the door and barred the Spirit out, he left his blessing.

It was a long night, if it were only a night; but Scrooge had his doubts of this, because while Scrooge remained unaltered in his outward form, the Ghost grew older, clearly older. Scrooge had observed this change, but never spoke of it, until they stood together in an open place, and Scrooge noticed that the Spirit's hair was grey.

'Are spirits' lives so short?' asked Scrooge.

'My life upon this globe, is very brief,' replied the Ghost. 'It ends tonight.'

'Tonight!' cried Scrooge.

'Tonight at midnight. Hark! The time is drawing near.'

The chimes were ringing the three quarters past eleven at that moment.

'Forgive me if I'm not justified in what I ask,' said Scrooge, looking intently at the Spirit's robe, 'but I see something strange, and not belonging to yourself, protruding from your robe.'

From the foldings of its robe, the Spirit brought two children; wretched and miserable. They knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment.

They were a boy and girl. Meagre, ragged, scowling and wolfish.

Scrooge started back, appalled. Having them shown to him in this way, he tried to say they were fine children, but the words choked themselves, rather than be parties to a lie of such enormous magnitude.

'Spirit! are they yours?' Scrooge could say no more.

'They are Mankind's,' said the Spirit, looking down upon them. 'This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased!' cried the Spirit, stretching out its hand towards the city.

'Have they no refuge?' cried Scrooge.

'Are there no prisons?' said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. 'Are there no workhouses?'

The bell struck twelve.

Scrooge looked about him for the Ghost, and saw it not. As the last stroke ceased to vibrate, he remembered the prediction of old Jacob Marley, and lifting up his eyes, beheld a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground, towards him.