

A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

Episode 7: The last of the three spirits



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The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached. When it came, Scrooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

It was shrouded in a deep black garment - which concealed its head, its face, its form - and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. Scrooge felt that it was tall and stately when it came beside him, and that its mysterious presence filled him with a solemn dread. He knew no more, for the Spirit neither spoke nor moved.

'Am I in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?' said Scrooge.

The Spirit answered not, but pointed onward with its hand.

'You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us,' Scrooge pursued. 'Is that so, Spirit?'

The upper portion of the garment was contracted for an instant in its folds, as if the Spirit had nodded. That was the only answer he received.

Although well used to ghostly company by this time, Scrooge feared the silent shape so much that his legs trembled beneath him, and he found that he could hardly stand when he prepared to follow it. The Spirit paused for a moment, observing his condition, and giving him time to recover.

Scrooge felt a vague, uncertain, horror to know that behind the dusky shroud, there were ghostly eyes intently fixed upon him, while he, though he stretched his own to the utmost, could see nothing but a spectral hand and one great heap of black.

'Ghost of the Future!' he exclaimed, 'I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I'm prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?'

It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight before them.

'Lead on!' said Scrooge. 'Lead on! The night is waning fast, and it's precious time to me, I know. Lead on!'

The Phantom moved away as it had come towards him. Scrooge followed in the shadow of its dress, which bore him up, he thought, and carried him along.

They scarcely seemed to enter the city, for the city rather seemed to spring up about them, and encompass them of its own act. But there they were, in the heart of it: amongst the merchants, who hurried up and down, and chinked the money in their pockets, and conversed in groups, and looked at their watches, as Scrooge had seen them often.

The Spirit stopped beside one little knot of business men. Observing that the hand was pointed to them, Scrooge advanced to listen to their talk.

'No,' said a great big man with a monstrous chin, 'I don't know much about it. I only know he's dead.'

'When did he die?' inquired another.

'Last night, I believe.'

'Why, what was the matter with him?' asked a third. 'I thought he'd never die.'

'God knows,' said the first man, with a yawn.

'What's he done with his money?' asked a fourth.

'I haven't heard,' said the man with the large chin, yawning again. 'Left it to his company, perhaps. He hasn't left it to **me**. That's all I know.'

This pleasantry was received with a general laugh.

'It's likely to be a very cheap funeral,' said the same speaker; 'for upon my life I don't know of anybody who'll go to it. Suppose we volunteer?'

'I don't mind if lunch is provided,' observed one of the gentleman.

Another laugh.

'Well, I'll offer to go, if anybody else will,' said the first speaker. 'When I come to think of it, I'm not at all sure that I wasn't his most particular friend, for we used to stop and speak whenever we met!'

Speakers and listeners strolled away, and mixed with other groups. Scrooge knew the men, and looked towards the Spirit for an explanation.

The Phantom glided on into a street. Its finger pointed to two persons meeting. Scrooge listened again, thinking that the explanation might lie here.

He knew these men also. They were men of business: very wealthy, and of great importance. He'd made a point always of standing well in their esteem - in a business point of view, that is.

'How are you?' said one.

'How are you?' returned the other.

'Well!' said the first. 'Old Scratch has got his own at last, hey?'

'So I am told,' returned the second. 'Cold, isn't it?'

'But seasonable for Christmas time' said the first. 'Good morning!'

Not another word. That was their meeting, their conversation, and their parting.

Scrooge was at first inclined to be surprised that the Spirit should attach importance to conversations apparently so trivial; but feeling assured that they must have some hidden purpose, he set himself to consider what it was likely to be. They could scarcely be supposed to have any bearing on the death of Jacob, his old partner, for that was **past**, and this Ghost's province was the **future**. Nor could he think of any one immediately connected with himself, to whom he could apply them. But certain they held some moral for his own improvement, he resolved to treasure up every word he heard, and everything he saw; and especially to observe the shadow of himself when it appeared. For he had an expectation that the conduct of his future self would give him the clue he missed, and would render the solution of these riddles easy.

Quiet and dark, beside him stood the Phantom, with its outstretched hand. When Scrooge roused himself from his thoughtful quest, he fancied that the Unseen Eyes were looking at him keenly. It made him shudder, and feel very cold.

They left the busy scene, and went into an obscure part of the town, where Scrooge had never been before, though he knew its bad repute. The ways were foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, drunken, slipshod, ugly. Alleys and archways, disgorged their offences of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the straggling streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth, and misery.

The Spirit took Scrooge to an old shop, where upon the floor within were piled up heaps of rusty keys, nails, chains, hinges, files, scales, weights, and refuse iron of all kinds. Sitting in among the wares he dealt in, by a charcoal stove, made of old bricks, was a grey-haired rascal, nearly seventy years of age, smoking a pipe, who had screened himself from the cold air outside, with a curtaining of miscellaneous tatters.

Scrooge and the Phantom came into the presence of this man, just as a woman with a heavy bundle slunk into the shop. But she had scarcely entered, when another woman, similarly laden, came in too; and she was closely followed by a man in faded black, who was no less startled by the sight of them, than they had been upon the recognition of each other. After a short period of blank astonishment, in which the old man with the pipe had joined them, they all three burst into a laugh.

'Look here, old Joe, here's a chance!' said the woman who'd entered first. 'If we haven't all three met here without meaning it!'

'You couldn't have met in a better place,' said old Joe, removing his pipe from his mouth. 'Come into the parlour and I'll shut the door of the shop. Come into the parlour. Come into the parlour,' he repeated.

The parlour was the space behind the screen of rags. The old man raked the fire together with an old stair-rod, while the woman who had already spoken threw her bundle on the floor, and sat down crossing her elbows on her knees, looking with a bold defiance at the other two.

‘What then, Mrs Dilber?’ said the woman. ‘Every person has a right to take care of themselves. **He** always did!’

‘That’s true, indeed!’ said the other woman, Mrs Dilber. ‘No man more so.’

‘Why then, don’t stand staring as if you was afraid, woman; who’s the wiser?’ said the first. ‘Who’s the worse for the loss of a few things like these? Not a dead man, I suppose.’

‘No, indeed!’ said Mrs Dilber, laughing.

‘If he wanted to keep ‘em after he was dead,’ pursued the woman, ‘why wasn’t he natural in his lifetime? If he had been, he’d have had somebody to look after him when he was struck with death, instead of lying gasping out his last there, alone by himself.’

‘It’s the truest word that ever was spoke,’ said Mrs Dilber. ‘It’s a judgment on him.’

‘I wish it was a little heavier judgment,’ replied the woman; ‘and it should have been, you may depend upon it, if I could have laid my hands on anything else. Open that bundle, old Joe, and let me have the value of it. Speak out plain. I’m not afraid to be the first, nor afraid for them to see it. We know pretty well that we were helping ourselves, before we met here, I believe. It’s no sin. Open the bundle, Joe.’

But before Old Joe could do as she directed, the man in faded black, stepped forward and produced **his** plunder. It was not extensive. A pencil-case, a pair of sleeve-buttons, and a brooch of no great value. They were examined and appraised by old Joe, who chalked the sums he was disposed to give for each, upon the wall, and added them up into a total when he found there was nothing more to come.

‘That’s your account,’ said Joe, ‘and I wouldn’t give another sixpence, if I was to be boiled for not doing it. Who’s next?’

Mrs Dilber was next. Sheets and towels, two old-fashioned silver teaspoons, a pair of sugar-tongs, and a few boots. Her account was stated on the wall in the same manner.

‘I always give too much to ladies. It’s a weakness of mine, and that’s the way I ruin myself,’ said old Joe. ‘That’s your account. If you asked me for another penny, I’d repent of being so generous and knock off half-a-crown.’

‘Now undo **my** bundle, Joe,’ said the first woman.

Joe went down on his knees for the greater convenience of opening it, and having unfastened a great many knots, dragged out a large and heavy roll of some dark stuff.

‘What do you call this?’ said Joe. ‘Bed curtains! You don’t mean to say you took them down, rings and all, with him lying there?’ said Joe.

‘Yes I do,’ replied the woman. ‘Why not?’

‘You were born to make your fortune,’ said Joe, ‘and you’ll certainly do it.’

‘I certainly shan’t hold my hand, when I can get anything in it by reaching it out, for the sake of such a man as **he** was, I promise you, Joe,’ returned the woman coolly. ‘Don’t drop that oil upon the blankets, now.’

'His blankets?' asked Joe.

'Whose else's do you think?' replied the woman. 'He isn't likely to take cold without 'em, I dare say...Ah! you may look through that shirt till your eyes ache, but you won't find a hole in it, not a threadbare place. It's the best he had, and a fine one too. They'd have wasted it, if it hadn't been for me.'

'What do you call wasting it?' asked old Joe.

'Putting it on him to be buried in, to be sure,' replied the woman with a laugh. 'Somebody was fool enough to do it, but I took it off again! If calico isn't good enough for such a purpose, it isn't good enough for anything. It's quite as becoming to the body. He can't look uglier than he did in that one.'

Scrooge listened to this dialogue in horror. As they sat grouped about their spoil, in the scanty light afforded by the old man's lamp, he viewed them with a disgust which could hardly have been greater if they had been obscene demons, offering for sale the corpse itself.

'Spirit!' said Scrooge, shuddering from head to foot. 'I see, I see. The case of this unhappy man might be my own. Merciful Heaven, what is this!'

He recoiled in terror, for the scene had changed, and now he almost touched a bed: a bare, uncurtained bed, on which, beneath a ragged sheet, there lay a something covered up, which, though it was dumb, announced itself in awful language.