

A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

Episode 8: An end to the haunting



A Christmas Carol...

By Charles Dickens...

Episode 8: An end to the haunting

The room was very dark, too dark to be observed with any accuracy, though Scrooge glanced around it, anxious to know what kind of room it was. A pale light fell straight upon the bed and on it - covered but unwatched, unwept, uncared for - was the body of a man.

Scrooge glanced towards the Phantom. Its steady hand was pointed to the head. The cover was so carelessly adjusted that the slightest raising of it would have disclosed the face. Scrooge thought of it, felt how easy it would be to do, and longed to do it; but had no more power to withdraw the veil than to dismiss the spectre at his side.

The body lay in the dark empty house, with not a man, woman or child to say that he was kind to me in this or that, and for the memory of one kind word I will be kind to him.

'Spirit!' Scrooge said, 'this is a fearful place. In leaving it, I shall not leave its lesson, trust me. Let us go!'

Still the Ghost pointed with an unmoved finger to the head.

'I understand you,' Scrooge returned, 'and I would do it, if I could. But I have not the power, Spirit. I have not the power.'

Again the Spirit seemed to look upon him.

'If there is any person in the town, who feels emotion caused by this man's death,' said Scrooge quite agonised, 'show that person to me, Spirit, I beseech you!'

The Phantom spread its dark robe before him for a moment, like a wing, and withdrawing it, revealed a room by daylight, where a mother and her children were.

She was expecting some one, and with anxious eagerness for she walked up and down the room, started at every sound, looked out from the window, glanced at the clock, tried - but in vain - to work with her needle, and could hardly bear the voices of the children in their play.

At length the long-expected knock was heard. She hurried to the door, and met her husband - a man whose face was careworn and depressed, though he was young. There was a remarkable expression in it now; a kind of serious delight of which he felt ashamed, and which he struggled to repress.

He sat down to the dinner that had been set for him by the fire and when she asked him faintly what news (which was not until after a long silence) he appeared embarrassed how to answer.

'Is it good?' she said, 'or bad?'

'Bad,' he answered.

'We're quite ruined?' she asked.

'No. There is hope yet, Caroline,' he replied.

'If **he** relents,' she said, 'there is. Nothing is past hope, if such a miracle has happened.'

'He's past relenting,' said her husband. 'He's dead.'

She was a mild and patient creature...but she was thankful in her soul to hear it, and she said so, with clasped hands. She prayed for forgiveness the next moment, and was sorry; but the first was the emotion of her heart.

The husband continued: 'What the woman whom I told you of last night, said to me, when I tried to see him and obtain a week's delay - and what I thought was a mere excuse to avoid me - turns out to have been quite true. He was not only very ill then, but dying.'

'To whom will our debt be transferred?' asked the wife.

'I don't know. But before that time we shall be ready with the money; and even though we were not, it would be bad luck indeed to find his successor so merciless. We may sleep tonight with light hearts, Caroline!'

Yes, their hearts were lighter and it was a happier house for this man's death! The only emotion that the Ghost could show Scrooge, caused by the event, was one of pleasure.

'Let me see some tenderness connected with a death,' said Scrooge, 'or that dark bedroom, Spirit, which we left just now, will be for ever present to me.'

The Ghost conducted him through several streets familiar to his feet; and as they went along, Scrooge looked here and there to find himself, but nowhere was he to be seen. They entered poor Bob Cratchit's house - the dwelling he'd visited before - and found the mother and the children seated round the fire.

Quiet. Very quiet. The noisy little Cratchits were as still as statues in one corner, and sat looking up at Peter, who had a book before him. The mother and her daughters were engaged in sewing. But they were all very quiet!

The mother laid her work upon the table, and put her hand to her face.

'The colour hurts my eyes,' she said. 'It makes them weak by candle-light; and I wouldn't show weak eyes to your father when he comes home, for the world. It must be near his time.'

'Past it rather,' Peter answered, shutting up his book. 'But I think he's walked a little slower than he used, these few last evenings, mother.'

They were very quiet again. At last she said, in a steady voice that only faltered once: 'I've known him walk with Tiny Tim upon his shoulder, very fast indeed.'

'And so have I,' cried Peter. 'Often.'

'And so have I!' exclaimed another. So had all.

'But he was very light to carry,' she resumed, intent upon her work, 'and his father loved him so, that it was no trouble: no trouble. And there's your father at the door!'

She hurried out to meet Bob as he came in. His tea was ready for him on the hob. Then the two young Cratchits got upon his knees and each child laid a little cheek against his face, as if they said: 'Don't mind it, father. Don't be grieved!'

Bob was very cheerful with them, and spoke pleasantly to all the family. He looked at the work upon the table, and praised the industry and speed of Mrs Cratchit and the girls. They would be done long before Sunday, he said.

'Sunday! You went today, then, Robert?' said his wife.

'Yes, my dear,' returned Bob. 'I wish you could have gone. It would have done you good to see how green a place it is. But you'll see it often. I promised him that I would walk there on a Sunday. My little, little child!' cried Bob. 'My little child!'

He broke down all at once. He couldn't help it. If he could have helped it, he and his child would have been farther apart perhaps than they were.

He left the room, and went up-stairs into the room above. There was a chair set close beside the child. Poor Bob sat down in it, and when he'd thought a little and composed himself, he kissed the little face. He was reconciled to what had happened, and went down again quite happy.

They drew about the fire, and talked, the girls and mother working still. Bob told them of the extraordinary kindness of Mr Scrooge's nephew, Fred, whom he had scarcely seen but once, and who, meeting him in the street that day, and seeing that he looked a little down, inquired what had happened to distress him. 'On which,' said Bob, 'for he is the pleasantest-spoken gentleman you ever heard, I told him. 'I am heartily sorry for it, Mr Cratchit,' he said, 'and heartily sorry for your good wife. If I can be of service to you in any way,' he said, 'come to me.'

'I'm sure he's a good soul!' said Mrs Cratchit.

'You would be surer of it, my dear,' returned Bob, 'if you saw and spoke to him. I shouldn't be at all surprised, mark what I say, if he got Peter a better situation.'

'Get along with you!' retorted Peter, grinning.

'It's just as likely as not,' said Bob, 'one of these days; though there's plenty of time for that. But however and whenever we part from one another, I'm sure we shall none of us forget poor Tiny Tim - shall we - or this first parting that there was among us?'

'Never, father!' cried they all.

'And I know,' said Bob, 'I know, my dears, that when we recollect how patient and how mild he was - although he was a little, little child - we shall not quarrel easily among ourselves, and forget poor Tiny Tim in doing it.'

'No, never, father!' they all cried again.

'I'm very happy,' said Bob, 'I'm very happy!'

Mrs Cratchit kissed him, his daughters kissed him, the two young Cratchits kissed him, and Peter and himself shook hands.

'Spectre,' said Scrooge, 'something informs me that our parting moment is at hand. I know it, but I know not how. Tell me what man that was whom we saw lying dead?'

The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come conveyed him, as before - though to a different time, Scrooge thought - until the Spirit was asked by Scrooge to tarry for a moment.

'This court,' said Scrooge, 'through which we hurry now, is where my place of occupation is, and has been for a length of time. I see the house. Let me behold what I shall be, in days to come.'

The Spirit stopped; the hand was pointed elsewhere.

'The house is just there,' Scrooge exclaimed. 'Why do you point away?'

The finger underwent no change.

Scrooge hastened to the window of his office, and looked in. It was an office still, but not his. The furniture was not the same, and the figure in the chair was not himself. The Phantom pointed as before.

He joined the Spirit once again, and wondering why it was that he'd not seen himself, accompanied it until they reached an iron gate. He paused to look round before entering.

A churchyard. Here, then, the wretched man whose name he had now to learn, lay underneath the ground.

The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to one. Scrooge advanced towards it trembling. The Phantom was exactly as it had been, but Scrooge dreaded that he saw new meaning in its solemn shape.

'Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point,' said Scrooge, 'answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they shadows of things that may be, only?'

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

'The course of our lives will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,' said Scrooge. 'But if those courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!'

The Spirit was immovable as ever.

Scrooge crept towards the gravestone, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name: Ebenezer Scrooge.

'Am I that man who lay upon the bed?' he cried, upon his knees.

The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again.

'No, Spirit! Oh no, no!'

The finger still was there.

'Spirit!' he cried, tight clutching at its robe, 'hear me! I'm not the man I was. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?'

For the first time the hand appeared to shake.

'Good Spirit,' he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: 'Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you've shown me, by an altered life!'

The kind hand trembled.

'I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!'

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger yet, repulsed him.

Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed, Scrooge saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.