

A Christmas Carol


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5: THE SECOND OF THE THREE SPIRITS

Awakening and sitting up in bed to get his thoughts together, Scrooge had no occasion to be told that the bell was again upon the stroke of one. But, being prepared for almost anything, he was not by any means prepared for nothing; and, consequently, when the bell struck one, and no shape appeared, he was taken with a violent fit of trembling.

Five minutes, ten minutes, a quarter of an hour went by, yet nothing came. All this time, as he lay upon his bed, a blaze of ruddy light, streamed upon the clock, which Scrooge began to think at last might be coming from the adjoining room. This idea taking full possession of his mind, he got up softly and shuffled in his slippers to the door.

The moment Scrooge's hand was on the lock, a strange voice called him by his name and bade him enter. He obeyed.

It was his own room. There was no doubt about that. But it had undergone a surprising transformation. The walls and ceiling were hung with living green, from every part of which bright gleaming berries glistened. The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there; and such a mighty blaze went roaring up the chimney. Heaped upon the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, great joints of meat, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense cakes, and seeth-

ing bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam.

Upon this couch, there sat a jolly giant, glorious to see: who bore a glowing torch, which he held up high, to shed its light on Scrooge, as he came peeping round the door.

'Come in!' exclaimed the Ghost. 'Come in and know me better!'

Scrooge entered timidly. He was not the dogged Scrooge he had been; and though the Spirit's eyes were clear and kind, he did not like to meet them.

'I am the Ghost of Christmas Present,' said the Spirit. 'Look upon me!'

Scrooge did so. It was clothed in one simple green robe, bordered with white fur. Its feet, observable beneath the ample folds of the garment, were bare; and on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath, set here and there with shining icicles. Its dark brown curls were long and free: free as its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its cheery voice, and its joyful air.

'You've never seen the like of me before!' exclaimed the Spirit.

'Never,' Scrooge made answer.

The Ghost of Christmas Present rose.

'Spirit,' said Scrooge submissively, 'conduct me where you will. I went forth last night and I learned a lesson which is working now. Tonight, if you





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have aught to teach me, let me profit by it.'

'Touch my robe!' said the Spirit.

Scrooge did as he was told and held it fast.

Holly, mistletoe, red berries - all vanished instantly. So did the room, the fire, the ruddy glow. They stood, invisible as before, in the suburbs of the town on Christmas morning, before the house of Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchit.

Up rose Mrs Cratchit, dressed poorly, but brave in ribbons, which are cheap and make a goodly show for sixpence; and she laid the cloth, assisted by Belinda Cratchit, second of her daughters, while Master Peter Cratchit plunged a fork into the saucepan of potatoes. Now two smaller Cratchits, boy and girl, came tearing in, screaming that outside the baker's they had smelt the goose, and known it for their own; and basking in luxurious thoughts of sage-and-onion, these young Cratchits danced about the table, and exalted Master Peter Cratchit to the skies, while he blew the fire, until the slow potatoes bubbling up, knocked loudly at the saucepan-lid to be let out and peeled.

'What has ever got your father then?' said Mrs Cratchit. 'And your brother, Tiny Tim! And your sister Martha warn't as late last Christmas Day by half-an-hour!'

'Here's Martha, mother!' said a girl, appearing as she spoke.

'Here's Martha, mother!' cried two young Cratchits. 'Hurrah! There's such a goose, Martha!'

'Why, bless your heart alive, my dear, how late you are!' said Mrs Cratchit.

'We'd a deal of work to finish up last night,' replied the girl, 'and had to clear away this morning, mother!'

'Well! Never mind, so long as you're come,' said Mrs Cratchit. 'Sit down before the fire, my dear, and have a warm!'

'No, no! There's father coming,' cried the two young Cratchits, who were everywhere at once. 'Hide, Martha, hide!'

So Martha hid herself, and in came Bob, the father, in his threadbare clothes with Tiny Tim upon his shoulder. Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame!

'Why, where's our Martha?' cried Bob, looking round.

'Not coming,' said Mrs Cratchit.

'Not coming!' said Bob. 'Not coming upon Christmas Day!'

Martha didn't like to see him disappointed, even if it were only in joke, so she came out from behind the closet door, and ran into his arms, while the two young Cratchits hustled Tiny Tim, and bore him off into the wash-house, that he might hear the pudding singing in the pot.

'And how did little Tim behave?' asked Mrs Cratchit, when Bob had hugged his daughter to his heart's content.

'Good as gold,' said Bob, 'and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people





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saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see.'

Bob's voice was tremulous when he told them this, and trembled more when he said that Tiny Tim was growing strong and hearty.

His little crutch was heard upon the floor, and back came Tiny Tim before another word was spoken, escorted by his brother and sister to his stool before the fire. Bob, turned up his cuffs and compounded some hot mixture in a jug, and stirred it round and round and put it on the hob to simmer; while Master Peter, and the two young Cratchits went to fetch the goose, with which they soon returned.

Such a bustle ensued that you might have thought a goose the rarest of all birds; a feathered phenomenon; and, in truth, it was something very like it in that house. Mrs Cratchit made the gravy hissing hot; Master Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigour; Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple-sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates; Bob took Tiny Tim beside him in a tiny corner at the table; the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody.

At last the dishes were set, and grace was said. It was succeeded by a breathless pause, as Mrs Cratchit, looked slowly all along the carving-knife, preparing to plunge it in the goose. And when she did, and the long expected gush of stuffing issued forth, one murmur of delight arose all round the table, and even Tiny Tim beat on the table with the handle of his knife, and feebly cried Hurrah!

Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavour,

size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration. Eked out by apple sauce and mashed potatoes, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family.

The plates were changed by Miss Belinda and now Mrs Cratchit left the room, to take the pudding up, and bring it in. Suppose it should not be done enough! Suppose it should break in turning out! Suppose somebody should have got over the wall of the backyard, and stolen it, while they were merry with the goose! All sorts of horrors were supposed by Mrs Cratchit.

In half a minute Mrs Cratchit returned: flushed but smiling proudly, with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in ignited brandy, and with Christmas holly stuck into the top.

Oh, a wonderful pudding! Bob Cratchit said that he regarded it as the greatest success achieved by Mrs Cratchit since their marriage. Mrs Cratchit said that now the weight was off her mind, she would confess that she had had her doubts about the quantity of flour. Everybody had something to say about it, but nobody said or thought it was at all a small pudding for such a large family.

At last the dinner was all done, the cloth was cleared, the hearth swept, and the fire made up. The compound in the jug being tasted, and considered perfect, apples and oranges were put upon the table, and a shovel-full of chestnuts on the fire. Then all the Cratchit family drew round the hearth, and at Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glass: two tumblers, and a custard-cup without a handle.

These held the hot stuff from the jug, however, as well as golden goblets





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would have done; and Bob served it out with beaming looks, while the chestnuts upon the fire sputtered and cracked noisily. Then Bob proposed:

'A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!'

Which all the family re-echoed.

'God bless us every one!' said Tiny Tim, the last of all.

He sat very close to his father's side upon his little stool. Bob held his withered little hand in his, as if he loved the child, and wished to keep him by his side, and dreaded that he might be taken from him.

'Spirit,' said Scrooge, with an interest he had never felt before, 'tell me if Tiny Tim will live.'

'I see a vacant seat,' replied the Ghost, 'in the poor chimney-corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die.'

'Oh no,' said Scrooge. 'Oh, no, kind Spirit! say he'll be spared.'

'If he be like to die,' returned the Ghost, 'he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.'

Scrooge hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief. He bent before the Ghost's rebuke, and trembling cast his eyes upon the ground. But he raised them speedily, on hearing his own name.

'Mr Scrooge!' said Bob; 'I give you Mr Scrooge, the Founder of the Feast!'

'The Founder of the Feast indeed!' cried Mrs Cratchit, reddening. 'I wish I had him here. I'd give him a piece of my mind to feast upon.'

'My dear,' said Bob, 'the children; Christmas Day.'

'It should be Christmas Day, I am sure,' said she, 'on which one drinks the health of such an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man as Mr Scrooge. You know he is, Robert! Nobody knows it better than you do!'

'My dear,' was Bob's mild answer, 'Christmas Day.'

'I'll drink his health for your sake and the day's,' said Mrs Cratchit, 'not for his. Long life to him. A merry Christmas and a happy new year! He'll be very merry and very happy, I have no doubt!' she added.

The children drank the toast after her. It was the first of their proceedings which had no heartiness. Tiny Tim drank it last of all, but he didn't care two-pence for it. Scrooge was the ogre of the family. The mention of his name cast a dark shadow on the party, which was not dispelled for full five minutes.

After it had passed away, they were ten times merrier than before, from the mere relief of Scrooge being done with. Bob told them how he'd enquired about a job for Master Peter, which would bring in, if obtained, full five shillings and sixpence weekly. The two young Cratchits laughed tremendously at the idea of Peter's being a man of business; and Peter himself looked thoughtfully





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at the fire, as if he were deliberating what particular investments he should favour when he came into the receipt of that bewildering income.

All this time the chestnuts and the jug went round and round; and bye and bye they had a song, about a lost child travelling in the snow, from Tiny Tim, who had a plaintive little voice, and sang it very well indeed.

There was nothing of high mark in this. They were not a handsome family; they were not well dressed; their shoes were far from being water-proof; their clothes were scanty. But, they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another and contented. And, when they faded, and looked happier yet in the bright sprinklings of the Spirit's torch at parting, Scrooge had his eye upon them - and especially on Tiny Tim - until the last.

