

A Christmas Carol

by Charles Dickens

adapted for the stage

by Geoffrey Simon Brown

November, 2023

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Charles Dickens

December 1843

*We're just sparks,
tiny parts
of a bigger constellation.
Miniscule molecules
that make up one body
The tragedy and pain
of a person that you've never met
is present in your nightmares,
in your pull towards
despair
The sickness of our culture
and the sickness in our hearts
Is a sickness that's inflicted
by this distance
that we share.*

Kae Tempest

October 2016

Notes:

A line break indicates a thought changing direction

A paragraph break indicates a thought unspoken

A beat indicates several thoughts unspoken

A silence indicates there is nothing to say

/ indicates the beginning of the following line

Dramatis personae:

Ebenezer Scrooge – A miser
Boy Scrooge – A student
Young Scrooge – An apprentice

Jacob Marley – Scrooge’s partner; a ghost

Ghost of Christmas Past
Ghost of Christmas Present
Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come

Bob Cratchit – Scrooge’s clerk; Alice’s husband
Alice Cratchit – Bob’s Wife
Martha, Peter, Belinda, Margret, Ben, & Tiny Tim Cratchit – Their children

Fred – Scrooge’s nephew; Fan’s son; Emily’s husband
Emily – Scrooge’s niece; Fred’s wife
Penny, Rose, & Topper – Their friends

Fan Scrooge – Scrooge’s sister
Mr. Creakle – Scrooge’s schoolmaster
Molly, Steerforth, Tommy, & Jane – Scrooge’s schoolmates

Fezziwig – Scrooge’s first employer; Gertie’s husband
Gertie Fezziwig – Fezziwig’s wife
Dick Wilkins – Scrooge’s colleague & friend; later, Belle’s husband
Belle – Scrooge’s fiancé; later, Dick’s wife
Jill – Dick & Belle’s daughter

Ethel & Bethel – Charity workers
Thomas – A boy who sings carols
Sam – A beggar
Ignorance & Want – Children
Arnault, Walton, & Koch – Bankers
Old Joe – A merchant
Mrs. Dilber – A laundress
Mrs. Charnock – A charwoman
Caroline & Simon – A couple in debt to Scrooge
Pickle – A girl who buys a turkey

The fiddler – A musician who steps in and out of the world of the play

0. A doornail

*[The curtain is drawn
The stage is empty
Except for a ghost light
Centre stage]*

*[The fiddler walks onstage
They look at the audience
And take them in
They turn the ghost light on]*

FIDDLER: Marley was dead
To begin with
There was no doubt about that
Old Marley was as dead as a doornail
This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of this story

Did Scrooge know he was dead?
Of course he did
Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years
Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole friend, and sole mourner
And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event

Oh, but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge
A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner

It was the very thing he liked
To edge his way along the crowded paths of life
Warning all human sympathy to keep its distance

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name
So there it stood years afterwards
Above the warehouse door:
Scrooge and Marley

Let's start our story here
At the firm of Scrooge and Marley

In a moment
I want you to imagine
You're in a city called London
It's 1843
And of all the good days in the year
It's Christmas Eve

*[The fiddler begins to play
The curtains open
The stage behind is filled with life
Bustling bodies hurrying home on Christmas Eve
We hear snippets of conversation, of singing, of bells ringing]*

*Like a radio being tuned to the right station
Houses and buildings weave past us as we fly over these streets
A cold wind blows and the streets empty
Light and colour begin to drain
And we land, finally, on a small, grey, counting house
The sign above the door reads 'Scrooge & Marley']*

ACT ONE

1. Scrooge & Marley's

*[If unfriendliness was a room, this would be it
Dreary and desaturated
Ledgers and papers stacked high on shelves
Light barely sneaking through dirty windows
Two men sit on opposite sides of the room:
Bob Cratchit and Ebenezer Scrooge]*

*[Bob is wearing every piece of winter clothing he owns
Shivering so hard that he can barely hold his pen
A fire with a candle's flame quivers in a stove beside him
Scrooge is unaffected by the cold]*

*[Silence
Except the sound of a clock ticking]*

*[Bob shivers and rubs his hands together
This subtle noise pulls Scrooge entirely out of his work
He glares at Bob
Bob mouths 'Sorry' and Scrooge goes back to work
Carefully, Bob tries to sneak a piece of coal into the fire
But drops it
Again, Scrooge stops what he is doing and glares
Even harder
At Bob
Bob puts his hands up in a silent apology
And goes back to his work
After a few moments
Bob sneezes
Scrooge slams his hands down on the desk
And stands up from his seat
Bob ducks behind his desk
Just then, the door bursts open]*

FRED: A merry Christmas, uncle!
God save you!

SCROOGE: Bah!
Humbug!

FRED: Christmas a humbug?
Uncle, you don't mean that, I am sure

SCROOGE: I do
Merry Christmas?
What reason have you to be merry?
You're poor enough

FRED: What reason have you to be dismal?
You're rich enough

SCROOGE: What else can I be when I live in such a world of fools as this?
Merry Christmas!
Out upon merry Christmas!
What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money?
A time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer?
If I could work my will
Every idiot who goes about with 'merry Christmas' on his lips
Should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart
Keep Christmas in your own way and let me keep it in mine

FRED: Keep it?
But you don't keep it

SCROOGE: Let me leave it alone, then!
Much good it has ever done you

FRED: I dare say there are many things from which I have derived good that I have not profited from
Christmas among the rest
I have always thought of Christmas time as a good time
A kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time
The only time I know of when men and women seem to open their shut up hearts freely
And think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave
And not another race of creatures bound on other journeys
And therefore, uncle
Though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket
I believe that it *has* done me good
And *will* do me good
And I say:
God bless it!

[*Bob applauds*]

SCROOGE: Let me hear another sound from *you* and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your job!
[*To Fred*] You're quite a powerful speaker, sir
I wonder you don't go into Parliament

FRED: Don't be angry, uncle
Come
Dine with Emily and I tomorrow

SCROOGE: Bah

FRED: We bring our dinner to the street and invite the whole community to join us
Say that I'll see you

SCROOGE: You'll see me in my grave before you see me dining with you on Christmas
Good afternoon

FRED: I want nothing from you
I ask nothing of you
We have never had any quarrel to which I have been a party
Why cannot we be friends?

SCROOGE: Good afternoon

FRED: I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute
But I have made the trial in homage to Christmas
And I'll keep my Christmas humour to the last
So a merry Christmas, uncle!

SCROOGE: Good afternoon!

FRED: And a happy new/ year!

SCROOGE: GOOD
AFTERNOON

[Beat]

FRED: *[To Bob]* And a merry Christmas to you, Bob

BOB: Yes! Merry Christmas, Fred!
And a happy new year!

[Fred closes the door]

SCROOGE: There's another fellow
My clerk
With fifteen shillings a week and a wife and family
Talking about a merry Christmas
I'll retire to Bedlam

*[Two charity workers enter
They bow to Scrooge before approaching him]*

BETHEL: Scrooge and Marley's, I believe

SCROOGE: Oh, here we go

ETHEL: Oh!
Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley?

SCROOGE: Mr. Marley has been dead for seven years
He died seven years ago, this very night

[There is wind and the lamps flicker]

ETHEL: I am so sorry for your loss

BETHEL: My sincerest condolences

SCROOGE: I've moved on

ETHEL: Well
While I never had the pleasure of meeting Mr
Marley was it?
I have no doubt his
Um
Liberality

SCROOGE: Ha!

ETHEL: Is well represented by his surviving partner

BETHEL: You see, at this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge
It is especially important that we make some slight provision for the poor and destitute
Who suffer greatly at the present time

SCROOGE: Are there no prisons?

ETHEL: Oh yes
Plenty of prisons

SCROOGE: And the union workhouses?
Are they still in operation?

ETHEL: They are

BETHEL: I wish I could say they were not

SCROOGE: Oh good!
I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course
I'm very glad to hear it

[Ethel and Bethel look at each other]

BETHEL: I
Don't think you are understanding us, Mr. Scrooge
A few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund
To buy the poor some meat and drink and means of warmth

ETHEL: What shall I put you down for?

SCROOGE: Nothing

BETHEL: Ah, you wish to be left anonymous!

SCROOGE: No, I wish to be left alone!

Look, I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry
I am in the business of money lending, not giving
If someone can't afford their house, then it's my job to take it from them
And I don't care if it's Christmas Day or any other day
If you can't pay your way through life
Then you're liable to lose it
My taxes already support the establishments I have mentioned
They certainly cost enough
And those who are badly off must go there

ETHEL: Many can't go there
And many would rather die!

SCROOGE: If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population!
Besides it's none of my business

BETHEL: It's all of our business!

SCROOGE: It's not mine!
It's enough for a man to understand his own business and not to interfere with other people's
Mine occupies me constantly

ETHEL: But Mr/ Scrooge, sir!

SCROOGE: GOOD AFTERNOON

*[Stunned
The two women exit the firm]*

SCROOGE: Thank you!

*[He tries to shake off this latest distraction
But no sooner has he picked up his pen
Than a boy begins to sing outside his door]*

THOMAS: God bless you, merry gentleman!
May nothing you dismay!
For Jesus Christ, our savior!
Was born upon this day!
To save us all from Satan's power!
When we have/ gone astray

SCROOGE: GO AWAY

[Scrooge picks up his ruler and throws it at the door]

*The singer flees in terror
Scrooge once more picks up his pen
Just as the bell begins to toll]*

SCROOGE: And there it is!
End of the day and nothing done
This whole afternoon has been a utter waste
Christmas!
Humbug!
[He starts to pack up for the day]
Make sure to be here on time tomorrow
There will be plenty of work to make up for in the morning

[Beat]

BOB: Mr. Scrooge?

SCROOGE: Yes, Mr. Cratchit

BOB: Tomorrow's Christmas

SCROOGE: Yes, Mr. Cratchit
That has been made abundantly clear to me

BOB: Mr. Scrooge
It's
I was planning to spend Christmas with my family

SCROOGE: So you'll be late, then

BOB: No
I/

SCROOGE: No?
Good
I'll see you in the morning

[He begins to leave]

BOB: Mr. Scrooge!

[Scrooge stops]

SCROOGE: Yes
Mr. Cratchit

BOB: Sir
It's just
It's usually expected on Christmas to be given the day

SCROOGE: The entire day?

BOB: If quite convenient, sir/

SCROOGE: It's not convenient
It's not convenient and it's not fair

BOB: Mr/

SCROOGE: If I was to dock you half a crown for it, you'd think yourself ill used
And yet you don't think *me* ill used when I pay a day's wages for no work

BOB: It is only once a year, sir
Nowhere else will even be open to do business with!

SCROOGE: A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty fifth of December
But I suppose you'll want to take the day from me nonetheless

[*Beat*]

BOB: Yes, sir?

[*Beat*]

SCROOGE: Be here all the earlier the next morning

BOB: I will
Good night
Have a merry
Have a
Good night, Mr. Scrooge

SCROOGE: Sweep up before you go
This place is filthy

[*The door slams behind him*]

2. Marley's ghost

[*The streets are dark with smog
And Scrooge winds through them
A group of children are playing
Upon seeing him, they scatter
Two lovers kiss on a doorstep
As Scrooge passes, they go inside and close the shutters
The fiddler steps into the play and becomes a street musician*]

SCROOGE: Shut up

[*The fiddler steps out of the play again
Scrooge continues pace*]

A beggar extends his hat out]

SAM: Scuse me, sir
I won't take much of your time
But it's a cold night out 'ere this evenin
And I'm tryna buy something to t'eat
Would chu/ be willin

[Scrooge hits Sam's hat out of his hands]

SCROOGE: Get a job

*[Wind blows the hat farther down the street
Sam chases after it
Scrooge continues through the desolate, freezing streets
A thick fog rolls in
Shadows from the streetlights play tricks on our eyes
And his]*

*[He arrives at his door
As he reaches for the handle
Suddenly
The door knocker transforms
It is now the ghostly face of his deceased partner
The face pushes out towards us
Bending the wood of the door like thin plastic]*

MARLEY: Ebenezer!

[Scrooge falls backwards]

SCROOGE: Ah!

Jacob Marley?

*[He stands up
The door is back to what it was
Scrooge leans in close to examine the door]*

SCROOGE: Nothing

*[Just then, Mrs. Dilber and Mrs. Charnock burst through it
He falls back again]*

DILBER: Oh!
Goodnight, Mr. Scrooge
Washing and bedding's all done for the holiday
Hope you have a good/ one!

SCROOGE: Bah!

CHARNOCK: Don't bother with him, Mrs. Dilber
He doesn't give a fig about any of us

*[They exit
Scrooge examines the door again]*

SCROOGE: Pooh pooh!

*[He steps inside
And slams the door shut
Total darkness]*

SCROOGE: Hello?

[Nothing]

*[Scrooge lights a candle to guide his way
Climbing the stairs to his room
We see his candle through the windows as he climbs
Whispering]*

SCROOGE: Hello?

*[He arrives in his bedroom
Still holding the candle]*

*[Whispering from the darkness
He looks around]*

SCROOGE: Who's there?

[Nothing]

[Whispering from the other side of the room]

SCROOGE: Who's there!

[Nothing]

*[Suddenly, Marley's face appears above the fireplace behind him
Ebeneeeezeeer
He whips around
The wall has returned to normal]*

SCROOGE: Humbug

*[He sits down by the fire
Just then the bell beside him begins to ring
Then every bell in the house begins to ring
Sound from every direction
Louder and louder]*

SCROOGE: Humbug!

*[We hear a massive bang and a ghostly cry
Ebeneeeeezeeeeer
Chains rattling
Scrooge brings his knees up and hides inside his dressing gown]*

SCROOGE: It's humbug still!
I won't believe it!

*[The closet door bursts open
Suspended in the doorway is the ghost of Jacob Marley
A terrifying apparition
Transparent
Wrapped in a chain
Hovering off the ground
His eyes dead and blind]*

MARLEY: Ebenezer Scrooge!

SCROOGE: Who are you?

MARLEY: In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley

SCROOGE: Hum
Humbug

MARLEY: You don't believe in me
Why do you doubt your senses?

SCROOGE: Because a little thing affects them
A slight disorder of the stomach
You may be an
An
An undigested bit of beef
A crumb of cheese
A fragment of underdone potato
There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!
Humbug, I tell you!
Hum/bug!

*[At this Jacob cries out and shakes his chain
The sound is so great the walls shake
The windows rattle
Scrooge falls to his knees]*

SCROOGE: Mercy!
Dreadful apparition
Why do you trouble me?

*[Marley steps into the room
His voice now enormous]*

MARLEY: It is required of every man
That the spirit within him walk abroad among his fellow beings
And if that spirit goes not forth in life
It is condemned to do so after death
I lived a life with eyes cast down
Never gazing beyond my own self concern
So now I persist here
Doomed to wander through the world and witness what I cannot share!

SCROOGE: You are fettered

MARLEY: I wear the chain I forged in life
Is its pattern strange to you?
Your chain was as heavy and as long as this seven Christmas Eves ago
You have laboured on it since!

SCROOGE: But why should you be punished, Jacob?
You were always a good man of business

MARLEY: Business!?
Mankind was my business!
The common welfare was my business!
Charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business!
The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!

SCROOGE: Jacob
Old Jacob Marley
Speak comfort to me, Jacob!

MARLEY: I have none to give, Ebenezer Scrooge
It is conveyed by other ministers to other kinds of men
Nor can I tell you what I would
I cannot rest
I cannot linger anywhere
In life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money changing hole
And weary journeys lie before me

SCROOGE: Seven years dead and travelling all the time?

MARLEY: The whole time

[Beat]

SCROOGE: You must have been very slow about it, Jacob

MARLEY: Slow!

SCROOGE: You haven't covered a great quantity of ground in seven years

MARLEY: Hear me!
[*The room shakes again*]
My time is nearly gone!

SCROOGE: I will
But don't be hard upon me, Jacob!
Pray!

MARLEY: I am here tonight to warn you
That you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate
A chance and hope of my procuring

SCROOGE: You were always a good friend to me
Thank'ee!

MARLEY: You will be haunted by three spirits

SCROOGE: Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?

MARLEY: It is

SCROOGE: I
I think I'd rather not

MARLEY: Expect the first tonight
When the bell tolls one

SCROOGE: Couldn't I take 'em all at once and have it over, Jacob?

MARLEY: Expect the second tomorrow at the same hour
The third upon the next night when the stroke of twelve has ceased to vibrate
[*Marley's chains drag him back*]
Look to see me no more!

[*The closet door slams shut
And Marley is gone
His last words boom and echo through the room
Outside we hear a cacophony
The street is filled with phantoms and spirits
All chained
All wailing
They fight against their chains and weights
Pulling them out of sight
The street is empty
Scrooge shuts the window
He is alone
Terrified, he climbs into bed*]

3. The first of the three spirits

*[The bell tolls one
Scrooge sits up with a start]*

SCROOGE: One

That's the time that Marley said
But

*[A bright light turns on
Pouring in from all directions]*

SCROOGE: Hello?

Is someone there?

*[The light is blinding
We cannot see anything
Then
As the light softens
A shape floats into the room
The Ghost of Christmas Past
Their appearance has the quality of a memory
Changing shape and form in front of us
This settles into a curious little figure
Hanging midair
Grinning at Ebenezer
Like an old man and a young girl at once
A jet of light pouring from their head
Illuminating the room
Neither says anything for a few moments
They stare at each other with curiosity]*

PAST: Hello!

SCROOGE: Hello

Are
Are you the spirit whose coming was foretold to me?

PAST: I am!

SCROOGE: Who
And what
Are you?

PAST: I am the Ghost of Christmas Past

SCROOGE: Long past?

PAST: No!

Your past

SCROOGE: I see

Would you mind putting something on to cover your head?
It's a little bright

PAST: The light I give comes from all the souls that have come before us
Every moment
Every memory
Would you so soon put it out?

SCROOGE: Well/ it's

PAST: Would you have me live in darkness?

SCROOGE: No/ I

PAST: Would you rather live in darkness yourself?!

SCROOGE: No!

I
Nevermind
The light is
Very
It's very nice

PAST: Thank you

[The ghost grins at him]

SCROOGE: May I ask what business brought you here?

PAST: Business?
Your welfare!
Your reclamation!

SCROOGE: My reclamation?

Oh
Well
In that case
No need to bother
I'm feeling very well already
All I need is a good night's rest, I'll be fully reclaimed, thank you very much
Good/ night!

*[Scrooge tries to get back under the covers
But the spirit takes him by the arm
And pulls him to the window]*

PAST: Take heed!

Rise!
And walk/ with me!

SCROOGE: Ahhh!
What are you doing?

*[They are both in front of the window
It rises open]*

PAST: Come

SCROOGE: Spirit
I am mortal
And liable to fall

PAST: Bear but a touch of my hand here
[Laying their hand on his heart]
And you shall be upheld in more ways than this
Are you ready?

SCROOGE: No

[The spirit grins again]

PAST: Come!

*[They pull Scrooge through the window
He screams
As they fly above the city
Until the buildings vanish beneath them
When they land they are standing on an open country road
Snow dusts the ground]*

4. Childhood

SCROOGE: Good heaven!
I know this place
I was a boy here
Oh, the smell, spirit!
Do you smell that?
The earth
The trees

PAST: The bread rising in the bakery
The stables down the road

SCROOGE: Oh, I remember everything

PAST: You remember the way?