

A Christmas Carol : in Prose being a Ghost Story of Christmas

Numéro d'inventaire : 2010.07774.2

Auteur(s) : Charles Dickens

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Type de document : imprimé divers

Période de création : 3e quart 20e siècle

Date de création : 1964 (restituée)

Inscriptions :

- marque : Omnivox P. 3128

Matériau(x) et technique(s) : papier

Description : Livret agrafé.

Mesures : hauteur : 24 cm ; largeur : 15,6 cm (dimensions du livret fermé)

Notes : Interprètes : Frederick Payne (Le Récitant), Frank Thorton (le neveu de Scrooge), Brenda Cleather (Mrs Cratchit) , Anne Baker (La femme du neveu de Scrooge) , Bill Gordon (le Fantôme du Noël présent) , Beter Ashby-Bailey (Scrooge), Robert Haviland (le Fantôme de Marley et Mr Fezziwig) - Frank Ball (Bob Cratchit et le Fantôme du Noël passé).

Mots-clés : Anglais

Utilisation / destination : enseignement

Élément parent : 2010.07774

Autres descriptions : Langue : anglais

Nombre de pages : 12 p.



A CHRISTMAS CAROL
IN PROSE
BEING A GHOST STORY OF CHRISTMAS
by CHARLES DICKENS

P. 3128

Adapted and Produced

by

SYDNEY STEVENS



CAST

Frederick Payne

Peter Ashby Bailey

Frank Thornton

Robert Haviland

Brenda Cleather

Anne Baker

Frank Ball

Bill Gordon

Anthony Baker



STAVE I

MARLEY'S GHOST

Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it, and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his

sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend, and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnized it with an undoubted bargain. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him.

Oh ! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge ! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner ! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire ; secret and self-contained and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait ; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue ; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with glad looks, "My dear Scrooge, how are you ? When will you come to see me ?" No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock.

But what did Scrooge care ! 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.

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Once upon a time — of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve — old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already : it had not been light all day ; and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices.

The door of Scrooge's counting-house was open, that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was copying letters. Scrooge had a small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room ; and so surely as the clerk came in with the shovel, the master predicted that it would be necessary for them to part. Wherefore the clerk put on his white comforter, and tried to warm himself at the candle, in which effort, not being a man of strong imagination, he failed.

NEPHEW : A Merry Christmas, uncle ! God save you !

It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who came upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of his approach.

SCROOGE : Bah ! Humbug !

NEPHEW : Christmas a humbug, uncle ? You don't mean that, I'm sure ?

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

NEPHEW : Come, then, what right have you to be dismal ? and what reason have you to be morose ? You're rich enough.

SCROOGE : Bah ! Humbug !

NEPHEW : Oh don't be cross, uncle !

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.

NEPHEW : Uncle !

SCROOGE : Nephew, keep Christmas in your way and let me keep it in mine. NEPHEW : Keep it ! But you don't keep it !

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

NEPHEW : There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say — Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come around, as a good time ; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time ; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they were really 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 !

The clerk in the tank incontinently applauded. Becoming immediately sensible of the impropriety, he poked the fire, and extinguished the last frail spark for ever.

SCROOGE : Let me hear another sound from you and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your situation.

NEPHEW : Oh, don't be angry, uncle. Come ! Dine with us tomorrow.

Scrooge said that he would see him — yes, indeed he did. He went the whole length of the expression, and said that he would see him in the extremity first.

NEPHEW : But why ?

SCROOGE : Why did you get married ?

NEPHEW : Because I fell in love.

SCROOGE : Because you fell in love !

Good afternoon !

NEPHEW : Nay, Uncle, but you never came to see me before that happened. Why give it as a reason for not coming now ?

SCROOGE : Good afternoon !

NEPHEW : I want nothing from you ; I ask nothing of you ; why cannot we be friends ?

SCROOGE : Good afternoon !

NEPHEW : I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute. We've never had any quarrel, to which I've been party. 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 !

NEPHEW : And a Happy New Year !

SCROOGE : Good afternoon !

His nephew left the room without an angry word, notwithstanding. He stopped at the outer door to bestow the greetings of the season on the clerk, who, in letting Scrooge's nephew out, let two other people in. They were portly gentlemen, pleasant to behold, and now stood with their hats off in Scrooge's office. They had books and papers in their hands, and bowed to him.

1ST GENTLEMAN : Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge, or Mr. Marley ?

SCROOGE : Mr. Marley has been dead these seven years ; he died seven years ago this very night.

1ST GENTLEMAN : We have no doubt his liberality is well represented by his surviving partner. At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge, it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessities ; hundreds of thousands are in want of human comforts, sir.

SCROOGE : Are there no prisons ?

1ST GENTLEMAN : Plenty of prisons.

SCROOGE : And the Union workhouses, are they still in operation ?

1ST GENTLEMAN : They are. Still, I wish I could say they were not.

SCROOGE : The treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then ?

1ST GENTLEMAN : Both very busy, sir. SCROOGE : Oh, 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.

1ST GENTLEMAN : Under the impression that they scarcely furnish Christmas cheer of mind or body to the multitude, a few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for ?

SCROOGE : Nothing !

1ST GENTLEMAN : You wish to be anonymous ?

SCROOGE : I wish to be left alone. Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make myself merry at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned ; they cost enough ; and those who are badly off must go there.

1ST GENTLEMAN : 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. Good afternoon, gentlemen.

Seeing clearly that it would be useless to pursue their point, the gentlemen withdrew. Scrooge resumed his labours with an improved opinion of himself and in a more facetious temper than was usual with him.

At length the hour of shutting up the counting-house arrived. With an ill-will, Scrooge dismounted from his stool and tacitly admitted the fact to the expectant clerk in the tank, who instantly snuffed his candle out, and put on his hat.

SCROOGE : You'll want all day tomorrow, I suppose ?

CRATCHIT : If quite convenient, sir.

SCROOGE : It's not convenient, and it's not fair. If I was to stop half a crown for it, you'd think yourself ill-used, I'll be bound ? And yet, you don't think me ill-used, when I pay a day's wages for no work.

GRATCHIT : It's only once a year, sir.
SCROOGE : A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December ! But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next morning !

Scrooge took his melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern ; and having read all the newspapers, went home to bed. He lived in chambers which had once belonged to his deceased partner. They were a gloomy suite of rooms. Now, it is a fact that there was nothing at all particular about the knocker on the door, except that it was very large. It is also a fact that Scrooge had seen it night and morning during his whole residence in that place ; also that Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the city of London. Then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his key in the lock of the door, saw in the knocker, without its undergoing any intermediate process of change — not the knocker, but Marley's face.

Marley's face. It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look, with ghostly spectacles turned up upon its ghostly forehead ; and though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless. That, and its livid colour, made it horrible. As Scrooge looked fixedly at this phenomenon, it was a knocker again. To say that he was not startled, would be untrue. But he put his hand upon the key, turned it sturdily, walked in, and lighted his candle. He closed his door, and locked himself in — double-locked himself in, which was not his custom. Thus secured against surprise, he took off his cravat ; put on his dressing-gown and slippers, and his night-cap ; and sat down before the fire. As he threw his head back in the chair, his glance happened to rest upon a bell, a disused bell, that hung in the room. It was with great astonishment, and with a strange, inexplicable dread, that as he looked, he saw this bell begin to swing, and so did every bell in the house. The bells ceased as they had begun, together. They were succeeded by a clanking noise, deep down below ; as if some person were dragging a heavy chain over the casks in the wine-merchant's cellar. Scrooge then remembered to have heard that ghosts in haunted houses were described as dragging chains.

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

His colour changed, though, when, without a pause, it came on through the heavy door, and passed into the room before his eyes. Upon its coming in, the dying flame leaped up, as though it cried, "I know him ! Marley's ghost !" and fell again.

The same face : the very same. Marley in his pig-tail, usual waistcoat, tights and boots, the tassels on the latter bristling, like his pig-tail, and his coat-skirts, and the hair upon his head. The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail ; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel. His body was transparent, so that Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind.

SCROOGE : How now ! What do you want with me ?

MARLEY : Much !

SCROOGE : Who are you ?

MARLEY : Ask me who I was.

SCROOGE : Who were you, then ?

MARLEY : In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley.

SCROOGE : Can you — can you sit down ?

MARLEY : I can.

SCROOGE : Do it, then.

MARLEY : You don't believe in me.

SCROOGE : I don't.

MARLEY : What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses ?

SCROOGE : I don't know.

MARLEY : Why do you doubt your senses ?

SCROOGE : Because a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato. . . . Mercy ! Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me ?

MARLEY : Do you believe in me, or not ?

SCROOGE : I do — I must. But why do spirits walk the earth, and why do they come to me ?

MARLEY : It is required of every man that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide ; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world — oh, woe is me ! — and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness. I wear the chain I forged in life ; I made it link by link, and yard by yard.

SCROOGE : Jacob, old Jacob Marley, tell me more ! Speak comfort to me, Jacob !

MARLEY : I have none to give. Nor can I tell you what I would. A very little more is all permitted to me. I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere. At this time of the rolling year I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode ? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me ? Hear me ! My time is nearly gone.

SCROOGE : I will — but don't be hard upon me !

MARLEY : I am here tonight to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate. A chance and a hope of my procuring, Ebenezer !

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

MARLEY : You will be haunted by three Spirits.

SCROOGE : I — I think I'd rather not. MARLEY : Without their visits you cannot hope to shun the path I tread. Expect the first tomorrow, when the bell tolls one. Expect the second on the next night at the same hour. The third upon the next night when the last stroke of twelve has ceased to vibrate. Look to see me no more ; and look that, for your own sake, you remember what has passed between us !

Scrooge ventured to raise his eyes, and found his supernatural visitor confronting him in an erect attitude, with its chain wound over and about its arm. The apparition walked backward from him ; and at every step it took, the window raised itself a little, so that when the spectre reached it, it was wide open. The spectre floated out upon the bleak, dark night.

STAVE II

THE FIRST OF THE THREE SPIRITS

SCROOGE : Why, it isn't possible, I can't have slept through a whole day, and far into another night ! ...a quarter past ; ...half past ; ...a quarter to ; ...the hour itself !

Light flashed up in the room upon the instant ; the curtains of his bed were drawn, Scrooge, starting into a half-recumbent attitude, found himself face to face with the unearthly visitor who drew them. It was a strange figure, like a child — yet not so like a child as like an old man, cleaved through some supernatural medium. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white as if with age ; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. The arms were very long and muscular. It wore a tunic of the purest white ; and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful.

SCROOGE : Who, and what, are you ?

CHRISTMAS PAST : I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.

SCROOGE : Long past ?

CHRISTMAS PAST : No. Your past. Rise, and walk with me !

The weather and the hour were not adapted to pedestrian purposes. Scrooge rose ; but the Spirit made towards the window.

SCROOGE : I am a mortal, and liable to fall.

CHRISTMAS PAST : Bear but a touch of my hand there, and you shall be upheld in more than this !

As the words were spoken, they passed through the wall and stood upon an open country road, with fields on either hand.

SCROOGE : Good Heaven ! I was bred in this place. I was a boy here !

CHRISTMAS PAST : You recollect the way ?

SCROOGE : Remember it ? I could walk it blindfold !

CHRISTMAS PAST : Strange to have forgotten it for so many years ! Let us go on !

They walked along the road, Scrooge recognizing every gate, and post, and tree ; until a little market-town appeared in the distance, with its bridge, its