

WIZARD ENGLISH TRAINING CENTER

CHAPTER ONE

Scrooge

Marley was dead. That was certain because there were people at his funeral. Scrooge was there too. He and Marley were business partners, and he was Marley's only friend. But Scrooge looked very happy at the funeral because on that day he made some money. Scrooge was a clever businessman.

Yes, old Marley was certainly dead. But years later his name was still there above the office door. Scrooge and Marley. That was the company's name. Sometimes people called Scrooge 'Scrooge' and sometimes 'Marley'. He always answered. It was all the same to him.

Oh, but he was a mean man, Scrooge! He never spent any money and he never gave any away. He was an old miser. And he was a cold and solitary man. The cold was inside him. You could see it in his red eyes and on his blue nose and thin, white lips. You could hear it in his hard voice, and it made his office cold, especially at Christmas. Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come and see me?' Children never spoke to him, and even dogs ran away from him. But Scrooge didn't care. He liked it. That was what he wanted.

One Christmas Eve Scrooge was sitting in his office. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon but it was already dark. The weather was very cold and there was a lot of fog. It came into the office through the windows and doors. Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's clerk, was copying letters in a dark little room, and the old man watched him carefully. Bob had a very very small fire in his room. It was even smaller than Scrooge's, and he tried to warm his hands at the candle but he couldn't do it.

'A merry Christmas, uncle!' said a happy voice. And Scrooge's nephew Fred came in.

'Bah!' answered Scrooge. 'Humbug!'

His nephew looked warm. His face was red and his eyes were bright.

'Christmas a humbug, uncle?' he cried, surprised. 'You don't mean that, I'm sure.'

'Yes, I do,' said Scrooge. 'Merry Christmas! Why are you merry? You're a poor

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man, aren't you?'

'Well, why are you so unhappy? You're rich.'

'Bah! Humbug!'

'Don't be angry, uncle,' said Fred.

'Why not? There are too many fools in this world. You say "Merry Christmas" when you're a year older and poorer. That's stupid!'

'Uncle - please!'

'Nephew! You have your own Christmas and I'll have mine. Leave me alone.'

'But you don't celebrate Christmas, uncle.'

'Because I never make any money at Christmas. I don't like it. Leave me alone.'

'But Christmas is a good time,' said the nephew. 'It's the only time in the year when people open their hearts and help each other. They become kind and generous. I like Christmas and I say God bless it!'

The clerk in his little room clapped his hands happily and said, 'Yes, that's right!'

'Another word from you and you'll lose your job,' Scrooge said to him.

'Don't be angry, uncle. Come and eat with us tomorrow,' said his nephew.

'No! Go away! I'm busy.'

'But why won't you come?'

'Why did you get married?' Scrooge asked.

'Because I fell in love.'

'Because you fell in love! Bah! That's more stupid than a merry Christmas. Good afternoon.'

'But why don't you ever come to see me, uncle?'

'Good afternoon,' said Scrooge.

'Can't we be friends?'

'Good afternoon,' said Scrooge.

'Well. I'm very sorry about this, but I wish you a merry Christmas with all my heart, uncle.'

'Good afternoon,' said Scrooge.

'And a happy new Year!'

'Good afternoon!' said Scrooge.

So his nephew went to the door and opened it. But before he left, he said 'Merry

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Christmas!' to the clerk, who answered with a warm ' Happy Christmas!'

'Are you stupid too?' Scrooge said.

At that moment two fat gentlemen came in.

'Excuse me, is this Scrooge and Marley's?' said one of them. 'May I ask if you are Mr Scrooge or Mr Marley?'

'Mr Marley is dead. He died on Christmas Eve seven years ago.'

'At this festive time of the year, Mr Scrooge,' said the man, taking a pen from his pocket, 'we ask people to give some money to help the poor. There are thousands of people with nothing to eat at Christmas.'

'Aren't there any prisons?' asked Scrooge.

'Yes, lots of them.'

'And what about the workhouses? Aren't there still lots of them?'

'Unfortunately, yes.'

'Good. I'm happy to hear it.'

'We don't think the people in the workhouses or prisons are happy about it. They don't have much to eat or drink, and they're always cold. How much can you give us, sir?'

'Nothing!' Scrooge replied. 'Leave me alone. I don't celebrate Christmas and I don't give money to lazy people. I help to pay for the workhouses and prisons. That's enough.'

'But many people can't go there and they'll die in this cold weather.'

'Well, there are too many people in the world already, so that's a good thing.'

Good afternoon, gentlemen!'

So the two men went out and Scrooge continued his work. It became colder and foggier and darker. When a boy came to sing a Christmas carol outside Scrooge's door, he stood up and shouted angrily, 'Go away!' The boy was frightened and ran away very quickly.

Finally, it was time to close the office and go home. Scrooge stopped his work and put down his pen. The clerk put on his hat to go.

'You want all day tomorrow, do you?' said Scrooge.

'If it's all right, sir - yes.'

'It's not all right,' Scrooge answered. 'I must pay you for a day's holiday.'

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'It's only once a year, sir.'

'Bah! Every December 25th you get money for nothing! Well, arrive here extra early on the 26th - do you hear me?'

'Yes, sir,' said the clerk.

And when he left the office, he ran and danced all the way home because it was Christmas Eve.

CHAPTER TWO

Marley's Ghost

Scrooge walked home to the rooms where he lived. Years ago his partner Marley lived there. They were very old and dark and silent. The knocker on the door was large but it was like hundreds of other door knockers. Scrooge never looked at it. And he wasn't thinking about Marley when he put his key in the door. So how did he see Marley's face in the knocker? Yes, Marley's face! There was a strange light around it. It looked at Scrooge with its glasses up in its hair, like Marley when he was alive. The hair was moving slowly, the eyes were wide open, and the face was very white. Scrooge looked at it for a moment, and then it was a knocker again. He was surprised, but he went in and lit his candle. Then he looked at the knocker again.

'Pooh, pooh!' he said, and closed the door.

The sound echoed around the house, but Scrooge wasn't frightened of echoes and he went slowly up the dark stairs. He liked darkness; it was cheap. He looked around his room: nobody under the table, nobody under the sofa, nobody under the bed, nobody in the cupboards. He locked the door and put on his dressing-gown, slippers and nightcap. Then he sat in front of an old fireplace with a very small fire in it. For a moment he thought he saw Marley's face in the fire.

'Humbug!' he said.

Then he looked at the old bell above him on the wall. He was very surprised when this bell began to move. At first it moved slowly and quietly, but soon it made a very loud sound and all the bells in the house began to ring too. Suddenly they stopped.

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Scrooge heard a strange noise far away in the house - a noise of metal, like chains. It was coming up the stairs. Something was coming towards his door.

'It's humbug!' he said. 'I don't believe it.'

But the thing came into the room and stopped in front of him.

He couldn't believe his eyes! The same face: Marley's face! Scrooge recognised his dead partner's clothes and boots, and he saw a long chain round his transparent body. The chain had heavy cash-boxes, keys, locks, and account books on it. Marley was looking at him with cold, dead eyes. There was a handkerchief round his head and chin.

'Well?' Scrooge said. 'What do you want with me?'

'Much!' It was certainly Marley's voice.

'Who are you?'

'Ask me who I was?'

'Who were you then?'

'In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley.'

'Sit down - if you can.'

The Ghost sat in a chair on the other side of the fireplace.

'You don't believe in me, do you?' it said.

'No, I don't.'

'Why not?'

'Because perhaps I ate a piece of meat or cheese and my stomach didn't digest it, so you are only the consequence of a bad stomach.'

Scrooge said this because he didn't want to show his terror. But the Ghost's cold eyes frightened him very much.

'If I eat this candle,' Scrooge continued, 'I'll see hundreds of ghosts like you, but they'll only be in my head.'

Then the Spirit gave a terrible cry, and it shook its chain with a tremendous noise. Scrooge trembled. And then he fell out of his chair with horror when the Ghost took off the handkerchief and its chin dropped on its chest.

'Help!' he cried with his hands on his face. 'Oh, why are you here, terrible Spirit?'

'Do you believe in me or not?'

'Yes, I do - I must!' Scrooge replied. 'But why do you come to me?'

'If a man's spirit stays away from other people while he is alive, it must walk

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through the world after he is dead, but it cannot share the happiness of living people.'
And again the Ghost shook its chain with a sad cry.

'Why are you wearing that chain?' Scrooge asked, trembling.

'Because I made it when I was alive. I stayed away from other people. I didn't try to help them. I never loved anybody; I loved only money. So I made this chain for myself and now I must wear it. I lived like you, Scrooge! Seven years ago your chain was long and heavy. Now it is very long and very heavy!'

Again Scrooge trembled in terror. 'Tell me more, old Jacob Marley. Help me!'

'I cannot help you, Ebenezer Scrooge,' answered the Ghost. 'I cannot rest, I cannot stay here. When I was alive, my spirit never walked out of our office. It was locked in there while I made all my money. So now I must travel and never stop.'

'Have you travelled all this time - for seven years?'

'Yes. No rest. No peace. Always travelling.'

'Do you travel fast?'

'Very fast. Like the wind.'

'Well, in seven years you have been to a lot of places then.'

'Oh but I am a prisoner!' cried the phantom, and it shook the chain again, a terrible sound in the silence of the night. 'I was also a prisoner in my life because I didn't try to help others.'

'But you were a good man of business, Jacob.' Scrooge was thinking of himself too.

'Business! What was my business? My business was people, my business was charity, my business was love, my business was goodness! But I didn't do anything good. I lived with my eyes closed. I didn't see the poor and hungry people in the streets. But now I must go. Listen!'

'I'm listening, Jacob,' Scrooge said.

'I am here tonight to tell you something. There is still hope for you, Ebenezer. You still have a chance.'

'You were always a good friend, Jacob. Thank you.'

'You will see three Ghosts.'

Scrooge looked frightened. 'Are they the hope and the chance you spoke about, Jacob?'

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'Yes.'

'Well - I don't want to see them...'

'You must! If you don't want to be like me, you must! The first Spirit will come at one o'clock tomorrow morning.'

'Can't they all come at one o'clock and finish it quickly, Jacob?'

'The second will come on the next night at the same time. The third will come on the night after that when the church bell strikes twelve midnight. You will not see me again. Remember my words!'

Then the Ghost put the handkerchief round its head and began to walk towards the window. It asked Scrooge to follow. But when the window opened, Scrooge stopped. He was very frightened because he could hear a great noise of crying outside. The air was full of ghosts. They were moving quickly here and there, and they all wore chains like Marley's Ghost. Their cries were very sad. There was one old ghost with a big metal box of money on a chain. It was unhappy because it couldn't help a poor woman and her baby out in the cold, foggy night without a home.

Marley's Ghost went out into the night. In a moment it was with the other ghosts, and all of them disappeared. Scrooge closed the window and went to the door. It was locked. Did Marley's Ghost really come through a locked door?

'Bah!' he said. And he began to say 'Humbug!' but stopped. He didn't want to say it now.

It was late and he was tired. So he went to bed and fell asleep immediately.

CHAPTER THREE

The First Spirit

When Scrooge woke up, it was very dark. The church clock struck twelve.

'Twelve!' said Scrooge, surprised. 'But it was after two o'clock when I went to bed. It's impossible! That clock is wrong.'

He got out of bed and went to the window, but he couldn't see much. It was dark, foggy and very cold. He went back to bed and began to think.

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'Was it all a dream? Was Marley's Ghost really here?' he said to himself.

Suddenly he remembered the Ghost's words: 'The first Spirit will come at one o'clock tomorrow morning.' So he decided to wait and see. After a long time he heard the church clock.

'It's one o'clock!' said Scrooge. 'And there's nobody here!'

At that moment there was a great light in the room and the curtains of his bed opened. Yes, a hand opened the curtain in front of his face! He sat up and saw a strange person. It was small, like a child, but it was also like an old man. Its long hair was white but its face looked young. It was wearing white clothes with summer flowers on them. There was a piece of green holly in its hand.

'Are you the first Spirit?' asked Scrooge.

'Yes, I am,' the visitor replied in a quiet voice.

'Who and what are you?'

I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.'

'Whose past?'

'Your past.'

'Why are you here?'

'To help you.'

'I thank you,' Scrooge said. 'If you want to help me, let me sleep.'

'Get up and walk with me,' said the Spirit, and it took his arm.

Scrooge wanted to say that it was late, the weather was very cold, and his bed was warm. But the Spirit took him to the window.

'No, I'll fall!' Scrooge said.

The Spirit put its hand on his heart. 'If I touch you here, you won't fall,' it said.

Then they went through the wall, and suddenly they were standing on a road in the country. There was snow in the fields.

'Good Heavens!' Scrooge cried. This is where I was born! I was a boy here!' And he remembered all his old feelings about the place.

'Your lips is trembling,' said the Ghost. Are you crying?'

'No. no...' answered Scrooge. But a tear fell from his eye.

They walked along the road towards a little town with a bridge, a church and a river. Some boys came out of a school. They were laughing and singing because it was a

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holiday. They shouted 'Merry Christmas!' to each other.

'They are all in the past,' the Ghost said. 'They are only shadows.'

Scrooge knew all of them and he felt suddenly happy. Why did his cold eyes and heart become warm with joy? What did merry Christmas mean to him? He didn't like Christmas!

'The school is not empty,' said the Spirit. 'One child is still there. He hasn't got any friends.'

'I know, I know,' Scrooge said. And there were big tears in his eyes.

They went into the school, a big, old, dark place. Inside there was a long classroom. It looked sad and empty, with only a few desks and chairs in it. A little boy was sitting at one of the desks. He was reading a book by a small fire. Scrooge sat down on a chair and cried because he knew that the little boy was himself many years ago.

'That's me,' he said. 'I was left here one Christmas. Poor boy! Oh, I would like to... but it's too late now!'

'What is it?' asked the Spirit.

'Nothing. You see, there was a poor boy outside my office last night. He was singing a Christmas carol. But I didn't give him anything and I told him to go away.'

The Spirit smiled. 'Let's see another Christmas!'

Then everything changed. The boy was bigger, and the room looked older and darker. Scrooge saw himself again. He was walking sadly up and down. Then the door opened, and a little girl ran in. She was younger than the boy.

'Dear, dear brother!' she said happily. And she put her arms round his neck and kissed him. 'I've come to bring you home - home, home!'

'Home, Fanny?' the boy asked.

'Yes! Home for ever and ever!' the girl laughed. 'Father is kinder now and he wants you to come home. He sent me in a coach to fetch you. Oh, you'll never come back to this horrible school! And we'll be together for Christmas! I'm so happy!'

She began to pull him towards the door.

'Bring Master Scrooge's luggage to the coach!' somebody shouted in a terrible voice.

It was the teacher, and when he came in, the boy was very frightened.

'Goodbye, Master Scrooge!' said the teacher in his terrible voice.

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'Goodbye, sir,' the boy answered, trembling.

But when he got into the coach with his sister, he felt happy.

'Your sister had a very good heart,' said the Ghost. 'When she died, she left one child - your nephew.'

'Yes.' Scrooge remembered the conversation with his nephew in his office the afternoon before, and he felt bad about it.

Suddenly they were standing at the door of an office in the city. It was Christmas again.

'I know this place very well! And there's old Mr Fezziwig - alive again! Oh, dear old Fezziwig!'

Mr Fezziwig was a fat, happy man with a red face. He was working at a desk.

'Hey! Ebenezer! Dick!' he shouted. 'Stop your work!'

Scrooge, now a young man, came in with his friend Dick.

'It's Christmas Eve, boys! We must celebrate!' said Fezziwig. 'Let's stop work and close the office.'

So they put away all the books and papers and made a big fire. Then a man came in and started to play the violin. Mrs Fezziwig and the three Miss Fezziwigs arrived, and then a lot of young people came, and everybody began to dance to the music. Then there were games and more dances; cake and hot wine and more dances. And there was lots of roast beef and beer, and mince pies too. It was a wonderful party. At eleven o'clock everybody said 'Merry Christmas!' and the party finished. While Scrooge was watching all this, he laughed and sang and wanted to dance. He remembered it all and enjoyed it very much.

'You and Dick and everybody loved Mr Fezziwig,' the Ghost said to him. 'But why? That party was a very small thing. It cost only three or four pounds. So why did you all love him so much?'

'A small thing!' answered Scrooge. 'No! Fezziwig was our manager, so he could make us happy or unhappy. He could make our work easy or hard. He gave us a lot of happiness - and that was like a fortune in money!'

Then Scrooge looked sadly at the Ghost.

'What are you thinking about?' it asked.

'I... was thinking that I would like to speak to my clerk now...'

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'Come, there isn't much time,' said the Ghost. 'We must be quick.'

At that moment the scene vanished and they were standing in the open air. Scrooge saw a man of about forty. It was himself again, and his face showed the first signs of the problems of business and a passion for money. He was sitting next to a young girl dressed in black. It was his fiancée Belle. She was crying quietly.

'You love something more than me, Ebenezer,' she said.

'Oh? What?'

'Money. You are afraid of life, you are afraid of the world, and so you do only one thing: make money. Then you feel more secure. Money is your passion now.'

'No,' he said angrily. 'My feelings for you haven't changed, Belle!'

'But you have changed. When you promised to marry me, you were a different person.'

'I was a boy,' he said.

'And so my love is nothing to you now. You aren't happy with me and you don't want to marry me.'

'I've never said that.'

'Not in words, no - but I know it's true. I haven't got any money so you don't want me. Well, you're free to go. I hope you will be happy.'

And Belle went sadly away.

'Spirit!' Scrooge cried. 'Don't show me any more! Take me home!'

'There's one more scene.'

'No! No more! I don't want to see it!'

But suddenly they were in a room where a beautiful young girl was sitting near a big fire. Next to her sat her mother. This was Belle, now older. The room was full of children and there was a lot of noise. But Belle and her daughter liked it, and the daughter began to play with the children. Then the father came in with a lot of Christmas presents. He gave them to the children and they laughed and shouted happily. Finally, they went to bed and the house was quiet. The father sat by the fire with his wife and daughter. Scrooge looked at them and thought: 'How sad that don't have a wife and daughter!'

'Belle,' said the husband to his wife. 'I saw your old friend this afternoon.'

'Who was it? Mr Scrooge?'

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'Yes. I passed his office window and he was there. He hasn't got a friend in the world. His old partner Marley is dying.'

'Spirit, take me away!' said Scrooge.

'These things happened,' the Ghost answered, 'and they cannot be changed.'

'Please take me back! I can't watch this any more!'

At that moment the Spirit disappeared and Scrooge was in his bedroom again. He felt very tired, so he got into bed and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Second Spirit

Scrooge woke up, opened his bed-curtain and looked around. He was ready to see anything, but when one o'clock struck, nothing happened. After a while he saw a strong light in the next room. He got out of bed and went slowly to the door.

'Scrooge!' said a voice. 'Come in, Ebenezer!'

The room was his room, but it was different. On the walls there was some green holly with red berries, and mistletoe and ivy. In the fireplace was a great fire. On the floor there was a lot of food: turkey, goose, chicken, rabbit, pork and sausages, as well as mince pies, puddings, fruit, cakes, and hot punch. And on the sofa sat a very large man - a giant - and he was holding up a torch.

'Come in!' said the Ghost.

Scrooge went and stood in front of this giant, but he didn't look at it. He was too frightened.

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

So Scrooge looked. He saw that the Spirit was smiling. It had kind, gentle eyes. There was holly round its long dark hair. Its face was young and happy.

'You have never seen anybody like me before,' it said.

'Never.'

'And you have never met any of my brothers?'

'No. How many brothers have you got?'

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'More than eighteen hundred. I am the youngest.'

'Spirit,' Scrooge said, 'take me where you want. I learnt a good lesson last night.'

'Touch my clothes!'

When Scrooge did this, the room disappeared and he stood in the city streets on Christmas morning. There was a lot of snow. Some people were playing and throwing snowballs. Others were buying food in the shops. It was a busy, cheerful scene, and the bells were ringing.

Then a lot of poor people came along the street with their Christmas dinners of goose or chicken. They were taking them to the baker's shops to be cooked in the oven. The spirit took Scrooge to one of these shops and touched some of the dinners with its torch.

'What are you doing?' Scrooge asked.

'I am making these dinners extra good so the people will be happier,' it replied, smiling.

After a while Scrooge followed the Ghost to the suburbs of the city. They went to the house of Bob Cratchit, his clerk. The kind Ghost touched the house with its torch. Then they went in. Mrs Cratchit and her daughter Belinda were preparing the table for Christmas dinner. Young Peter Cratchit was helping them. Suddenly two little Cratchits ran in and shouted that the goose was ready at the baker's. Then the oldest daughter Martha arrived, and after her came Bob with his little son Tiny Tim on his shoulder. The child was a cripple and he walked around on a small crutch.

Young Peter went to fetch the goose. When he came back, all the children in the family shouted 'Hurray!' because they didn't often eat goose. Belinda made some apple sauce; Mrs Cratchit prepared the potatoes and the gravy; Martha put the hot plates on the table. Finally, everything was ready. When Mrs Cratchit cut the goose, everybody cried 'Hurray!' again, and Tiny Tim hit the table with his knife. The goose was small, but they all said it was the best goose in the world and ate every bit of it. Then Mrs Cratchit brought in the Christmas pudding with brandy on it. She lit the brandy with a match, and when they were all eating, they said, 'Oh, what a wonderful pudding!' Nobody said or thought that it was a very small pudding for a big family.

After dinner the Cratchits sat round the fire. They ate apples and oranges, and hot chestnuts. Then Bob served some hot wine.

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'A Merry Christmas to us all!' he said.

'A Merry Christmas!' the family shouted.

'And God bless everyone!' said Tiny Tim in his weak voice.

He sat very near his father. Bob loved his son very much and he held Tiny Tim's thin little hand.

'Will Tiny Tim live, Spirit?' Scrooge asked.

'I see an empty chair,' replied the Ghost, 'and a small crutch. But not Tiny Tim. If the future does not change, the child will die.'

'No, no!' said Scrooge. 'Say he will live, kind Spirit!'

'If the future is not changed, he will not see another Christmas. But you think that's a good thing, don't you? You said there are too many people in the world.'

Scrooge didn't answer and he didn't look in the Ghost's eyes. He felt very bad.

'Those were wicked words, Ebenezer Scrooge,' the Ghost continued. 'Do you think you can decide who will live or die? Are you better than this poor man's child, or millions like him? Perhaps you are worse in God's eyes!'

Scrooge trembled and looked at the ground. Suddenly he heard his name.

'Mr Scrooge! Let's drink to Mr Scrooge!' It was Bob Cratchit and he was holding up his glass.

'Drink to Mr Scrooge!' said Mrs Cratchit angrily. 'Drink to that hard old miser! What are you saying, Robert Cratchit?'

'My dear - the children. It's Christmas Day.'

'I know that, but I would like to tell Mr Scrooge what I think of him! You know how bad he is.'

'My dear, it's Christmas Day.'

'Well, I'll drink to him because it's Christmas. A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, Mr Scrooge! - But you won't be merry or happy, I know.'

The children drank to Scrooge too, but his name was like a dark shadow in the room and for a few minutes they were silent. Then they told stories and sang songs, and they felt better. The Cratchits were poor and they looked poor. Their clothes were old; there were big holes in their shoes. Bob Cratchit's salary was very small. He never had enough money and there was never much food in the house. But the family was contented now because it was Christmas. Scrooge watched them carefully. He listened

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to them well. And he looked at Tiny Tim very often before the family scene vanished.

It was dark now, and snow was falling. Scrooge and the Ghost walked along the streets and saw great fires in the houses, where families and friends were enjoying Christmas together. The Ghost was happy to see the celebrations. It laughed, and where it passed, people laughed too. And then Scrooge heard a loud, happy laugh. It was his nephew's. He saw him in a bright, warm room. When his nephew laughed, the other people in the room laughed with him.

'He said that Christmas was a humbug!' the nephew laughed. 'And he believed it too!'

'He's stupid and bad, Fred,' said his wife.

'Well, he's a strange man, and he isn't very happy.'

'But he's very rich, Fred.'

'Yes, my dear, but he doesn't do anything with his money. He doesn't help others, and he lives like a poor man.'

'Nobody likes him. I don't like him. He makes me angry.'

'I'm not angry with him. I feel sorry for him because he doesn't enjoy his life. He never laughs. He didn't want to eat with us today, but I'm going to ask him every year. I'll say, "How are you, Uncle Scrooge? Come and eat with us."'

Then they played some music and sang. After that, there were games. When they played twenty questions, Scrooge forgot that they couldn't hear him and he shouted his answers. Then his nephew thought of something and everybody asked him questions.

'Is it an animal?'

'Yes.'

'Does it live in the city?'

'Yes.'

'Is it a horse?'

'No.'

It wasn't a dog, a cat or a pigeon. It made horrible noises, sometimes it talked, and nobody liked it.

'I know what it is!' shouted Fred's wife. 'It's your Uncle Scro-o-o-o-oge!'

She was right.

'A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to the old man!' said Fred.

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Scrooge wanted to say this to Fred, but the scene vanished and he and the Ghost travelled again. Scrooge noticed that the Spirit looked older. Its hair was grey now.

'Is your life so short?' he asked.

'Very short. It ends tonight at midnight. It's eleven forty-five. I haven't got much time. Look - look down here!'

The Spirit opened its coat and Scrooge saw two children on the ground, a boy and a girl. They were very thin. Their clothes were old and poor, and they were trembling with cold. They looked very hungry. Their eyes were sad. They looked older than children and they were ugly, like monsters. Scrooge was shocked.

'Are they yours?' he asked.

'No. They are Man's. They belong to humanity.'

'Haven't they got a house or a family?'

'Aren't there a lot of prisons?' the Spirit replied. 'And aren't there any workhouses?'

'Oh, no — no! Those are my words!' Scrooge cried.

The church clock struck twelve. He looked around for the Ghost but it wasn't there. Then he remembered old Jacob Marley's words:

'The third Spirit will come at twelve midnight.'

CHAPTER FIVE

The Last of the Spirits

Another phantom was coming towards him. It was tall and silent. Scrooge couldn't see its face or its body because it was wearing long, black clothes and a black hood. There was something mysterious about it. When it came near him, Scrooge was very frightened. It didn't speak or move.

'Are you the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?' he asked.

The Spirit didn't answer, but its long, white hand came out from the black clothes and pointed down.

'Are you going to show me things from the future?' Scrooge asked.

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His legs were trembling a lot and so he couldn't follow the Ghost when it moved away. It stopped and waited for him. He couldn't see its eyes but he felt that they were looking at him. This Ghost was the most frightening of the three.

'Ghost of the Future!' he cried. 'I'm very frightened of you! But I know that you want to help me so I'll go with you. Please speak to me!'

It made no reply. Its long hand pointed ahead.

'All right, I'll come,' said Scrooge.

So the Ghost carried him to the centre of London. At a place called the Exchange he saw a lot of businessmen. Their pockets were full of money. They were walking around and talking to each other. They often jingled the money in their pockets and looked at their watches. Scrooge knew many of them. When the Ghost stopped near three men, he could hear their conversation.

'No, I don't know much,' said one very fat man. 'I only know he's dead.'

'When did he die?' another man asked.

'Last night, I think.'

'I thought he would never die. Was he very ill?'

'God knows.'

'What about his money?' asked a man with a very red face.

'I don't know,' replied the fat man. 'He hasn't left it to me.'

Everybody laughed.

'The funeral will be very cheap because only a few people will go,' the fat man continued.

'I'll go if there's a big lunch,' the red-faced man said.

Another laugh. And then the men went away. Scrooge looked at the Ghost.

'Who are they talking about?' he asked.

But the Ghost said nothing. It went into the street and showed Scrooge two men. He knew them. They were rich and important businessmen. First they said hallo. Then one of them said:

'Well, he's finally dead.'

'Yes, I've heard,' answered his companion. 'Cold, isn't it?'

'Very cold. But it's the right weather for Christmas. Would you like to come ice-skating?'

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'No. thank you. I'm too busy. Good morning.'

That was the end of their conversation. Scrooge was surprised. Who were they talking about? He couldn't think of anybody. Old Marley died seven years ago and this Ghost was showing him the future. He decided to wait and see. He looked around but couldn't see himself anywhere. Wasn't he there in the future? Silent and black, the Ghost stood near him. He knew that it was watching him and he trembled.

They went into a poor part of the city where the streets were dirty and narrow. There were dark shops and houses, and the people looked ugly and miserable. A lot of them were drunk. Rubbish was everywhere, and there were bad smells. The quarter was full of dangerous criminals. Scrooge followed the Ghost into a small, dark shop. It was full of dirty, old things - bottles, clothes, keys, chains. A man of about seventy with grey hair sat near a fire and smoked his pipe. Then a woman came in with a big, heavy box in her arms. She put it on the floor and sat down.

'Open it. Old Joe,' she said, 'and give me the money.'

The man opened the box. 'What are these?' he said. 'Bed- curtains! Did you take them while he was in bed?'

'Yes. Why not? There was nobody with him. There are blankets too.'

'His blankets?'

'Of course! He won't need them where he's going. Here's a beautiful, expensive shirt too. He was wearing it for his funeral. I thought, "What a pity! This is a very fine shirt but nobody will wear it again." So I took it off him.'

'You did well, madam,' laughed Old Joe. 'You're a clever woman and you'll make a fortune one day.'

'I must think of myself, like him. He was a selfish old miser. I cleaned his rooms and his clothes. I worked very hard for him but he never gave me anything. I wanted to take more things but his housekeeper took them before me.'

Just then the housekeeper came in. She had a large bag full of sheets, towels, clothes, and shoes.

'Now look in my bag. Old Joe,' she said, 'and tell me how much you'll give me.'

Old Joe counted up the money for each thing in the box and the bag and wrote some numbers on the wall.

'That's how much I'll give you,' he said. 'And no more. I always give too much and

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so I'm poor.' Then he opened a dirty bag and put the money on the floor. 'When he was alive, he frightened people and they hated him. So we get the profits now that he's dead. Ha, ha, ha!'

Scrooge watched this in horror. 'Spirit! I see and I understand. This could happen to me. Oh God, what's this now?'

The scene changed and he was near a bed. It had no blankets or curtains. There was only an old sheet with something under it - the body of a dead man. The Ghost pointed at the head, but Scrooge couldn't pull down the sheet and look at the dead man's face. He was shaking with terror. The body was cold, rigid, and alone in that dark room. 'How terrible!' thought Scrooge. 'Not a man, woman or child to say that he was kind to them in life and to remember him with love!' Then he heard the sound of rats behind the walls. Were they waiting, were they going to jump on the bed and...?

'Spirit!' he said. 'What a horrible place! I'll always remember this scene. Can we go now?'

But the Ghost still pointed at the dead man's head.

'I understand,' Scrooge said. 'But I can't do it. I ask you to show me somebody who is sorry that this man is dead.'

The Ghost took him to Bob Cratchit's house. The mother and children were sitting round the fire. They were quiet, very quiet. The little Cratchits sat like statues in a corner. Peter was reading.

'When is Father coming?' he asked. 'He's late. But I think he walks slower now.'

'I remember when he walked very fast with - with Tiny Tim on his shoulder,' said the mother. 'But Tiny Tim was very light - and his father loved him so much. Ah. there's your father at the door!'

Bob came in. He drank some tea while the two little Cratchits put their faces close to his, saying, 'Don't be sad, Father!'

So Bob tried to be cheerful; but suddenly he cried. 'My little child! My little boy!'

He went to a room upstairs. It looked as bright and happy as Christmas. He sat on a chair next to the bed. There was a little child on it. It was Tiny Tim, and he wasn't sleeping. He was dead. Bob kissed the little face; then he went downstairs.

'I met Mr Scrooge's nephew in the street.' he told the family. 'He asked me why I was so sad. When I told him, he said he was very sorry and wanted to help us. I think

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he's going to find a job for Peter.'

'He's a very good man,' said Mrs Cratchit.

'Yes. Children, when you all leave home in a few years, you won't forget Tiny Tim, will you?'

'Never, Father!' they all cried.

'Thank you. I feel happier now,' Bob said.

Scrooge said to the Ghost, 'Oh, please tell me who that dead man was!'

The Ghost took him near his office, but it didn't stop.

'Wait!' said Scrooge. 'My office is in that house. Let me go and see what I'll be in the future.'

The Ghost continued walking. Scrooge ran to the window of his office and looked in. He saw an office, but it wasn't his. Everything was different, including the man at the desk. He followed the Ghost again. It stopped at the gate of a cemetery.

'Am I going to learn the dead man's name now?' asked Scrooge.

The Spirit led him to a grave. He went near it, trembling.

'Before I look at the name,' he said, 'answer me one question. Is it really necessary for these things to happen or are they only possible?'

The Ghost didn't answer.

'I mean, if men change their lives and become better, will the future change too? Is this what you want to tell me?'

The Ghost was silent. Scrooge went slowly towards the grave, still trembling. He read the name on the gravestone: EBENEZER SCROOGE.

He fell on his knees. 'I was the dead man in the bed! Oh, Spirit! Oh no, no! Listen, I've changed. I won't be the same man as before. Tell me there is still hope - please! Tell me that if I change my life, the things that you have shown me will be different!'

The Spirit's hand trembled.

'I will celebrate Christmas with all my heart!' Scrooge continued. 'And I'll always try to have the Christmas spirit - every day of the year! I will live in the past, the present and the future. I will not forget the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me that I can clean the name off this stone!'

Scrooge held up his hands to the Ghost but suddenly it vanished. There was only a bed-curtain in front of his eyes.

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CHAPTER SIX

'A Merry Christmas, Mr Scrooge!'

The bed was his, the room was his, and best of all, he still had time to be a better man. He jumped out of bed.

'I will live with the spirits of the past, present and future in me!' he said, on his knees and with tears in his eyes. 'Thank you. Jacob Marley! God bless Christmas!'

Then he put on his clothes.

'My clothes are here: I am here. But the future is not here yet and I can change it!' he said, laughing and crying at the same time. 'What shall I do first? Oh, I feel as light as a feather! I'm as happy as an angel! A Merry Christmas to everybody! A Happy New Year to all the world!'

He danced in the sitting-room and looked around.

'There's the door where Jacob Marley came in. There's the place where the Ghost of Christmas Present sat. There's the window where I saw the ghosts in the air. It's all right, it's all true, it all happened!'

And he laughed and laughed. Then the church bells rang - ding, dong, ding, dong! It was a glorious sound! He opened the window and put out his head. No fog. It was a bright, sunny day and the air was cold and sweet.

'What's today?' Scrooge shouted to a boy in the street.

'Eh?' The boy looked very surprised.

'What's today, my boy?'

'It's Christmas Day.'

'Christmas Day!' Scrooge said happily to himself. 'So the Spirits did everything in one night. Hey, boy! Do you know the butcher's shop in the next street?'

'Of course!'

'You're an intelligent boy! Do you know if they've sold that big turkey in the window?'

'You mean the one as big as me?'

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'What a nice boy!' said Scrooge. 'Yes, that one.'

'No. It's still there.'

'Is it? Oh, good! Go and buy it for me, will you? Tell them to bring it here. If you come back in five minutes, I'll give you half-a-crown.'

The boy ran as fast as possible to the shop.

'I'll send it to Bob Cratchit,' Scrooge said. 'Ha, ha! He won't know who sent it!'

And he wrote Bob's address on a piece of paper. When the butcher's man arrived with the enormous turkey, Scrooge told him to call a cab. He paid for the turkey and the cab, and he gave the boy half-a-crown. He was laughing all the time. Then he put on his coat and walked along the street. He looked at all the people with a happy smile.

'Good morning!' people said to him. 'A Merry Christmas to you!'

And Scrooge answered in the same way.

'Ah, there are the two gentlemen who were asking for money in my office yesterday,' he said. 'How do you do my dear sirs! A Merry Christmas to you!'

'Mr Scrooge?' asked one of them.

'Yes. That's my name and perhaps you don't like me. Please excuse me for yesterday. Listen...'

Scrooge spoke quietly in the man's ear.

'Are you serious, Mr Scrooge?' The man was very surprised.

'Of course. Can you do me that favour?'

'My dear Scrooge, that's very generous! I don't know what to say to thank you.'

'Don't say anything. Come and see me tomorrow. I'll give it to you then. All right?'

Then Scrooge continued walking. He watched the people, he kissed little children, he played with some dogs, he looked at everything with love, and he felt very happy.

In the afternoon he went to his nephew's house. Everybody was in the dining-room.

'Fred!' said Scrooge at the door.

'My God! Who's that?' cried Fred.

'It's your Uncle Scrooge. I have come to dinner. Can I come in, Fred?'

'Come in? Of course, uncle! You're very welcome.'

Everybody was happy to see Scrooge and he was happy to see them. They ate a

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wonderful dinner, and then they played wonderful games and had a wonderful time!

Scrooge was in his office early the next morning. He was waiting for Bob Cratchit. Of course, he knew Bob would be late. Nine o'clock and no Bob. A quarter past nine. No Bob. At nine-twenty Bob ran in. He went into his room immediately and started to work fast.

'Hallo!' Scrooge said in his old angry voice. 'You're late!'

'I'm very sorry, sir!' Bob answered.

'Are you? Come here, Cratchit.'

'It's only once a year, sir,' said poor Bob. 'It won't happen again.'

'Well, my friend, I hope not,' Scrooge said with a big smile. 'Because I'm going to give you a bigger salary!'

Bob trembled. He couldn't believe his ears.

'A merry Christmas, Bob!' said Scrooge. 'This will be your happiest Christmas! Yes, I'm going to give you a lot more money and I'm going to help your poor family. Come on make a very big fire and let's have a drink. Bob Cratchit!'

Scrooge gave Bob more money, helped his family and did much more. Tiny Tim did NOT die and Scrooge was a second father to him. He became a good friend, a good manager and a good man. A few people laughed at him, of course, but he knew that some people always laugh at anything new, strange, and good. He often laughed now and that was the most important thing to him. He didn't see the Spirits again, and he celebrated every Christmas with all his heart. And, like Tiny Tim he said, 'God bless everyone!'