

A Christmas Carol: Marley's ghost

COMPREHENSION
CRUSHER

Narrative

Cloaking the streets in swirls of icy fog, the weather seemed determined to dampen London's festive mood. Whilst others ignored the conditions, added more logs to the glowing hearth, tied scarlet ribbons to their fir tree and hummed uplifting carols, Scrooge embraced the gloom. He hated Christmas, so the atmosphere matched his cheerless character perfectly.

With his collar upturned to block the biting temperature, Scrooge – a hunched figure leaning on a walking stick – dragged himself through the hostile iron gates of his residence and up the snow-frosted steps to his front door. He inserted and turned the heavy key, hearing the familiar clunk of the lock releasing within the frame.

As Scrooge straightened to push the uninviting door open, the knocker caught his attention. Bizarrely, it was glowing. What was happening? Peering suspiciously at the tarnished brasswork, Scrooge watched it alter... transform into a face – the unmistakable face of Marley, his deceased partner. The likeness was uncanny: wire-rimmed spectacles pushed up on a wrinkled brow; untidy wisps of hair; identical features – although the eyes were eerily still. Unblinking. The apparition's expression suggested no malice, but the experience flustered Scrooge; his stony heart pounded within its cage and his wheezing breath caught in his throat. However, when the vision faded, he immediately dismissed the event, entering his home with only a flicker of hesitation to glance at the back of the door. Satisfied that everything was in order, he slammed it firmly, defiantly barking, "Balderdash!"

Without the lively ring of family life to give it character, the house was hollow. Soulless. Scrooge's footsteps echoed along the lonely hallways as he climbed the stairs. Lit by only the weak flame of a candle stub, the walls loomed over him, but darkness was cheap, so it pleased him.

Perhaps the dimness conjured the next illusion: a shadowy horse-drawn funeral coach, which hurtled past Scrooge and disappeared through a wall on the first floor. Despising cowardice, Scrooge refused to be rattled, yet the memory of Marley's face lingered. He systematically checked every room... on, under and behind furniture... before double locking his door and settling for the night; further surprises were entirely unwelcome.

Within his room, the air was barely warmer than outside. Scrooge shivered in his tatty dressing gown and rubbed his skeletal hands together, but fuelling the fire beyond a mere flicker to warm his gruel was out of the question. His mean spirit prized money over comfort.



Sipping his lukewarm supper, Marley's face harassed Scrooge again: it emerged on every tile surrounding the fireplace. Agitated, he stood and paced the room, attempting to dislodge the irrational imaginings. "Humbug!" he bawled at the trickery. It worked; as quickly as it had arrived, the assembly of Marleys vanished.

Convinced that normality was restored, Scrooge reclaimed his chair. As he threw his head against the shabby fabric, his gaze fell upon the long-forgotten service bell that hung on the wall. As if disturbed by a mischievous breeze, it began to swing. Initially, its movements were gentle, creating no sound. Soon, though, it swung manically, awakening every bell in the house. Scrooge pressed his hands over his ears to deaden the racket. Did the commotion last seconds... a minute.... an hour? He wasn't sure, but when it abruptly ended, the silence that followed was equally painful. Sinister.

Causing Scrooge to cower, a new sound interrupted the quiet: chains. The haunting sound began as faint chinks... grew into dragging scrapes... developed into rhythmic clangs as the metal was heaved up the stairs. Who... or what was approaching?

"It's still humbug!" Scrooge bellowed, even though he knew very well that ghosts carry chains. "I won't bel-" The end of his declaration was stolen by a ghostly figure – which neither wood nor bolts could restrain – bursting into the room. As if they recognised the intruder, the dwindling flames leapt then died completely. Marley had returned.

Fear and the sight of his colleague – seven years dead – drained the last drops of colour from Scrooge's cheeks. He regarded the phantom closely. From his waistcoat to his boots, he was unchanged, yet he was alarmingly transparent; the buttons on the back of his coat were as clear as those on the front. Hanging from the chains that bound him were symbols of his earthly existence: padlocks, purses, boxes, ledgers and keys.

"W-what d-do you want with me?" Scrooge stammered, meeting Marley's death-cold eyes.

