

A New Christmas Carol

By Arthur Machen

Scrooge was undoubtedly getting on in life, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Ten years had gone by since the spirit of old Jacob Marley had visited him, and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come had shown him the error of his mean, niggardly, churlish ways, and had made him the merriest old boy that ever walked on 'Change with a chuckle, and was called "Old Medlar" by the young dogs who never revered anybody or anything.

And, not a doubt of it, the young dogs were in the right. Ebenezer Scrooge *was* a meddler. He was always ferreting about into other peoples' business; so that he might find out what good he could do them. Many a hard man of affairs softened as he thought of Scrooge and of the old man creeping round to the countinghouse where the hard man sat in despair, and thought of the certain ruin before him.

"My dear Mr. Hardman," old Scrooge had said, "not another word. Take this draft for thirty thousand pounds, and use it as none knows better. Why, you'll double it for me before six months are out."

He would go out chuckling on that, and Charles the waiter, at the old City tavern where Scrooge dined, always said that Scrooge was a fortune for him and to the house. To say nothing of what Charles got by him; everybody ordered a fresh supply of hot brandy and water when his cheery, rosy old face entered the room.

It was Christmastide. Scrooge was sitting before his roaring fire, sipping at something warm and comfortable, and plotting happiness for all sorts of people.

"I won't bear Bob's obstinacy," he was saying to himself—the firm was Scrooge and Cratchit now—"he does all the work, and it's not fair for a useless old fellow like me to take more than a quarter share of the profits."

A dreadful sound echoed through the grave old house. The air grew chill and sour. The something warm and comfortable grew cold and tasteless as Scrooge sipped it nervously. The door flew open, and a vague but fearful form stood in the doorway.

"Follow me," it said.

Scrooge is not at all sure what happened then. He was in the streets. He recollected that he wanted to buy some sweetmeats for his little nephews and nieces, and he went into a shop.

"Past eight o'clock, sir," said the civil man. "I can't serve you."

He wandered on through the streets that seemed strangely altered. He was going westward, and he began to feel faint. He thought he would be the better for a little brandy and water, and he was just turning into a tavern when all the people came out and the iron gates were shut with a clang in his face.

"What's the matter?" he asked feebly of the man who was closing the doors.

"Gone ten," the fellow said shortly, and turned out all the lights.

Scrooge felt sure that the second mince-pie had given him indigestion, and that he was in a dreadful dream. He seemed to fall into a deep gulf of darkness, in which all was blotted out. When he came to himself again it was Christmas Day, and the people were walking about the streets.

Scrooge, somehow or other, found himself among them. They smiled and greeted one another cheerfully, but it was evident that they were not happy. Marks of care were on their faces, marks that told of past troubles and future anxieties. Scrooge heard a man sigh heavily just after he had wished a neighbor a Merry Christmas. There were tears on a woman's face as she came down the church steps, all in black.

"Poor John!" she was murmuring. "I am sure it was the wearing cark of money troubles that killed him. Still, he is in heaven now. But the clergyman said in his sermon that heaven was only a pretty fairy tale." She wept anew.

All this disturbed Scrooge dreadfully. Something seemed to be pressing on his heart.

"But," said he, "I shall forget all this when I sit down to dinner with Nephew Fred and my niece and their young rascals."

It was late in the afternoon; four o'clock and dark, but in capital time for dinner. Scrooge found his nephew's house. It was as dark as the sky; not a window was lighted up. Scrooge's heart grew cold.

He knocked and knocked again, and rang a bell that sounded as faint and far as if it had rung in a grave.

At last a miserable old woman opened the door for a few inches and looked out suspiciously.

"Mr. Fred?" said she. "Why, he and his missus have gone off to the Hotel Splendid, as they call it, and they won't be home till midnight. They got their table six weeks ago! The children are away at Eastbourne."

"Dining in a tavern on Christmas day!" Scrooge murmured. "What terrible fate is this? Who is so miserable, so desolate, that he dines at a tavern on Christmas day? And the children at Eastbourne!"

The air grew misty about him. He seemed to hear as though from a great distance the voice of Tiny Tim, saying "God help us, every one!"

Again the Spirit stood before him. Scrooge fell upon his knees.

"Terrible Phantom!" he exclaimed. "Who and what are thou? Speak, I entreat thee."

"Ebenezer Scrooge," replied the Spirit in awful tones. "I am the Ghost of the Christmas of 1920. With me I bring the demand note of the Commissioners of Income Tax!"

Scrooge's hair bristled as he saw the figures. But it fell out when he saw that the Apparition had feet like those of a gigantic cat.

"My name is Pussyfoot. I am also called Ruin and Despair," said the Phantom, and vanished. With that Scrooge awoke and drew back the curtains of his bed.

"Thank God!" he uttered from his heart. "It was but a dream!"