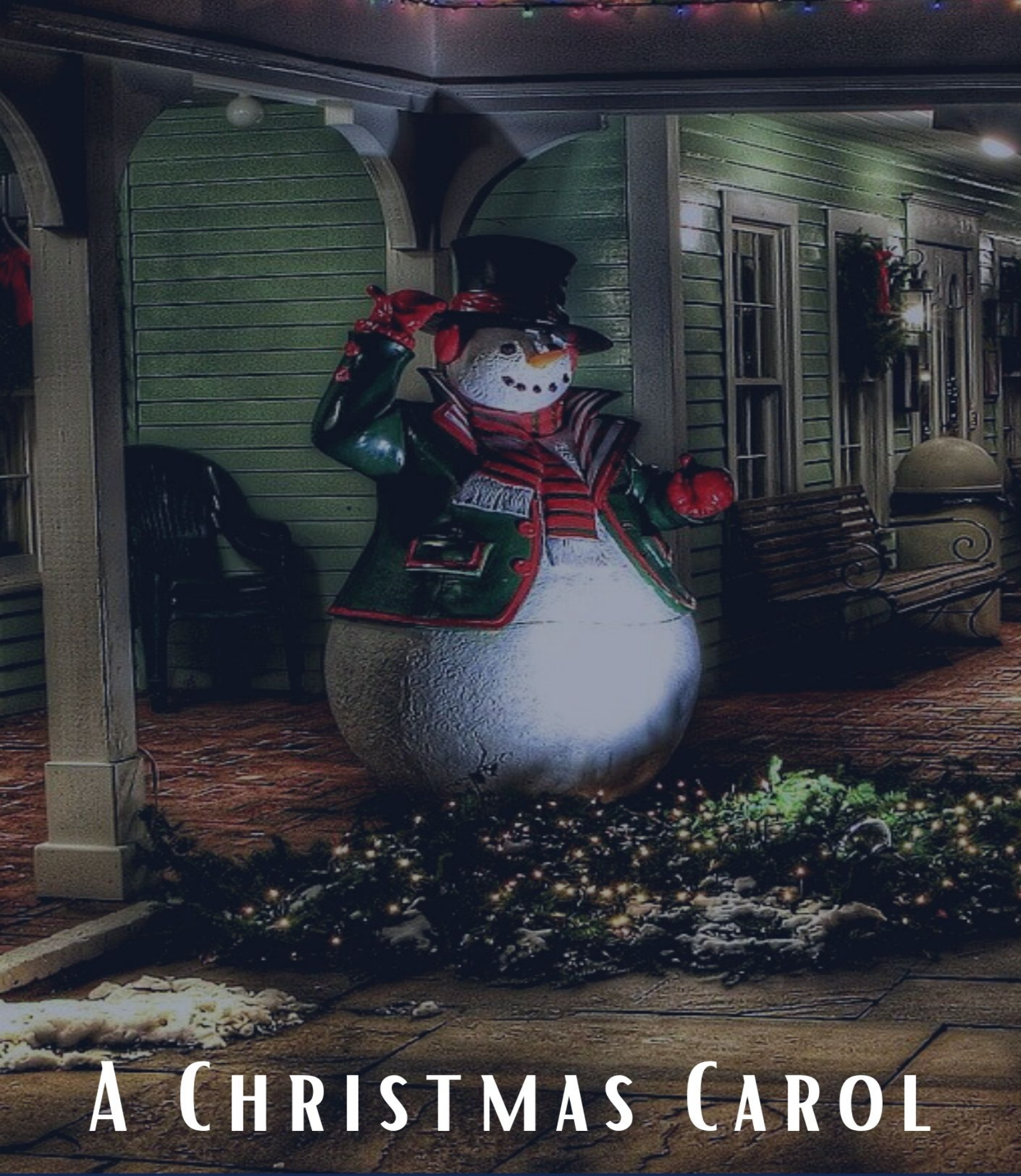

A Christmas Carol

BY CHARLES DICKENS

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The combined qualities of the realist and the idealist which Dickens possessed to a remarkable degree, together with his naturally jovial attitude toward life in general, seem to have given him a remarkably happy feeling toward Christmas, though the privations and hardships of his boyhood could have allowed him but little real experience with this day of days.

Dickens gave his first formal expression to his Christmas thoughts in his series of small books, the first of which was the famous "Christmas Carol," the one perfect chrysolite. The success of the book was immediate. Thackeray wrote of it: "Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it, a personal kindness."

This volume was put forth in a very attractive manner, with illustrations by John Leech, who was the first artist to make these characters live, and his drawings were varied and spirited.

There followed upon this four others: "The Chimes," "The Cricket on the Hearth," "The Battle of Life," and "The Haunted Man," with illustrations on their first appearance by Doyle, Maclise, and others. The five are known to-day as the "Christmas Books." Of them all the "Carol" is the best known and loved, and "The Cricket on the Hearth," although third in the series, is perhaps next in point of popularity, and is especially familiar to Americans through Joseph Jefferson's characterisation of Caleb Plummer.

Dickens seems to have put his whole self into these glowing little stories. Whoever sees but a clever ghost story in the"Christmas Carol" misses its chief charm and lesson, for there is a different meaning in the movements of Scrooge and his attendant spirits. A new life is brought to Scrooge when he, "running to his window, opened it and put out his head. No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring cold; cold, piping for the blood to dance to; Golden sun-light; Heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious!

Glorious!" All this brightness has its attendant shadow, and deep from the childish heart comes that true note of pathos, the ever memorable toast of Tiny Tim, "God bless Us, Every One!" "The Cricket on the Hearth" strikes a different note. Charmingly, poetically, the sweet chirping of the little cricket is associated with human feelings and actions, and at the crisis of the story decides the fate and fortune of the carrier and his wife.

Dickens's greatest gift was characterization, and no English writer, save Shakespeare, has drawn so many and so varied characters. It would be as absurd to interpret all of these as caricatures as to deny Dickens his great and varied powers of creation. Dickens exaggerated many of his comic and satirical characters, as was his right, for caricature and satire are very closely related, while exaggeration is the very essence of comedy. But there remains a host of characters marked by humour and pathos. Yet the pictorial presentation of Dickens's characters has ever tended toward the grotesque. The interpretations in this volume aim to eliminate the grosser phases of the caricature in favour of the more human. If the interpretations seem novel, if Scrooge be not as he has been pictured, it is because a more human Scrooge was desired—a Scrooge not wholly bad, a Scrooge of a better heart, a Scrooge to whom the resurrection described in this story was possible. It has been the illustrator's whole aim to make these people live in some form more fully consistent with their types.

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Chapter 1
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.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will, therefore, permit me to repeat, emphatically, that 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 solemnised it with an undoubted bargain.

The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died

before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot—say St. Paul's Church-yard, for instance—literally to astonish his son's weak mind.

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as Scrooge and Marley. 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. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often "came down" handsomely and Scrooge never did.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome 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, no man or

woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and, when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, "No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!"

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, was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge.

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: foggy withal: and he could hear the people in the court outside go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them. 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, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that, although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms. To see the dingy cloud come drooping down, obscuring everything, one might have thought that nature lived hard by and was brewing on a large scale.

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 very 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.

"A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" cried a cheerful voice. 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.

"Bah!" said Scrooge. "Humbug!"

He had so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost, this nephew of Scrooge's, that he was all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkled, and his breath smoked again.

"Christmas a humbug, uncle!" said Scrooge's nephew. "You don't mean that, I am sure?"

"I do," said Scrooge. "Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough."

"Come, then," returned the nephew gaily. "What right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough."

Scrooge, having no better answer ready on the spur of the moment, said, "Bah!" again; and followed it up with "Humbug!"

"Don't be cross, uncle!" said the nephew.

"A Merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" cried a cheerful voice.

"What else can I be," returned the uncle, "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, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books, and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will," said Scrooge indignantly, "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. He should!"