

Christmas Carol

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Least sign of the demand slackening. Dickens was in high spirits and wrote to a friend: "The 'Carol' is the greatest success, I am told, that this ruffian and rascal has ever achieved."

It is just 80 years since the "Carol" was given to the world, and it still remains a "best-seller." It has been translated into almost every language under Heaven, though I am at a loss to understand its popularity in Chinese.

In London, when it first appeared, people stopped one another in the street with the question: "Have you read it?" And the answer was: "Yes, God bless him, I have."

No one spoke more highly of it than Thackeray, except Tom Hood, who maintained that Dickens was inspired when he wrote it. Not long ago, at a sale of autographs, a letter of Stevenson turned up, which read something like this:—

"I don't know that I would recommend you to read the 'Carol,' because it is too much, perhaps. But oh! dear God, it is good—and I feel so good after it, and would do anything, yes, and shall do everything, to make the world a little better. . . . I shall never listen to the nonsense people tell me about not giving money—I shall give money; not that I haven't done so always, but I shall give now with a high hand."

That is the greatness of the "Carol": it makes everyone want "to make the world a little better"—that's the idea; and when everyone wants to do a thing, they usually do it.

Dickens gave Christmas a new meaning: from being merely a festival of the Church, kept to some extent by Church people, he made it a universal holiday and he did this without in any way derogating from its sacred character. What an achievement!

We hear rather too much to-day that art has nothing to do with morals, and it is admitted that an obvious moral may spoil an artistic effect, but not in the "Carol." We who know it by heart hurry to get to the moral we know so well. When the Phantom shrinks, collapses, and dwindles into a bed-post, and Scrooge awakes and "laughs a splendid laugh," we laugh with him. He rushes to a window, throws it open, and calls to a boy outside:—

"What's to-day, my fine fellow?"

"To-day!" replied the boy. "Why, Christmas Day."

"It's Christmas Day!" said Scrooge to himself. "I haven't missed it."

How happy he is! How happy we are, too! It is not too late to make amends!

Dickens puts the moral plainly when he makes the ghost of Marley say in reply to Scrooge's: "You were always a good man of business, Jacob":—"Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

It is such passages—and they abound in this, the loveliest of fairy tales—which justify the judgment which the world has passed on this great little book.

It is said that twenty-four editions were published in its original form.

Special Broadcasts for
Christmas Eve

From 1YA:
Broadcasting Choir
in
Christmas Carols

From 2YA:
Midnight Mass
from
St. Gerard's Church.

From 3YA:
Relay St. Gerard's from 2YA.

From 4YA:
Appropriate Recordings.

expired, scarcely a year goes by without a new edition being announced. There are superbly illustrated, printed, and bound books made for the rich, and cheap editions made to sell for a penny to the poor, and both classes buy: its sale has run into the millions.

The "Carol" is a tribute to the race and a glory to the man who wrote it. Its author turns more or less empty phrases into realities. "Good-will to-ward men," for example, he took out of the clouds, brought it down to earth, and set it to work. What an achievement!

When we say "Merry Christmas," we are unconsciously quoting Charles Dickens, who attached to Christmas its modern habit of giving and forgiving. Had he written only the "Carol" on the basis of good accomplished, he would have deserved his place in the Abbey Church of Westminster, where England lays her immortal sons.

And now for an outline of the plot of this "great little" book.

It is Christmas Eve in the offices of Scrooge and Marley. Marley, however, is dead—"dead as a doornail"—and his one-time partner is carrying on the business by himself. "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."

Through the door of Scrooge's office, which was always kept open so that he might keep an eye on his clerk, could be seen Bob Cratchitt, copying letters and vainly trying to keep himself warm.

Scrooge's nephew enters, offering his uncle a cheery "Merry Christmas," but is met with a "Bah! Humbug!" Undeterred, the nephew asks Scrooge to dinner, but the invitation is curtly refused.

As he leaves, two old gentlemen enter—"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." They appeal for a donation for the poor, but, "Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge. "Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying down the pen again. "And the union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge, "are they still in operation?" "They are, still," returned the gentleman, "I wish I could say they were not." "The treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?" said Scrooge. "Both very busy, sir." "Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course," said Scrooge. "I'm very glad to hear it." . . . Good afternoon, gentlemen."

THE fog and darkness thicken, and Scrooge ill-temperedly dismisses his clerk for the night. After dinner, and a gloating examination of his banking book, the old miser gropes his way home to a lonely room, and after his nightly gruel takes himself off to bed.

It is midnight, and Christmas Day is at hand. The ghost of Marley appears, and tells the half-terrified, half-defiant, Scrooge that on three succeeding nights he will be haunted by three spirits, those of Christmas past, present, and future.

At the appointed time the first arrives, and takes Scrooge to re-visit the scenes of his childhood. Scrooge hears the voices of his sister and of the woman he once loved. She tells him that his love for gold has destroyed all human feeling within him, leaving him heartless and calculating. The unhappy man, tortured with these realistic glimpses of the long-forgotten past, appeals to the Spirit to show him no more. The Ghost is relentless, however, and takes Scrooge to peep into a home—that of the girl he had once loved; who had since married and was engaged in bringing up a family.

Scrooge is greatly affected by the happy domestic scene, and begs the Now, the copyright having long since

Ghost to take him away. "I told you these were shadows of the things that have been," said the Ghost. "That they are what they are, do not blame me!"

"Remove me," Scrooge exclaimed. "I cannot bear it!"

The following night the Spirit of Christmas present appears, and once more Scrooge is taken on a journey, this time to the house of Bob Cratchitt, who he finds enjoying Christmas with his family in their own humble way. He then sees the vision of his nephew and niece, who discuss him—not very favourably, it must be said—and finally drink his health.

It is the following night, and the clock is striking twelve.

"As the last stroke ceased to vibrate he remembered the prediction of old Jacob Marley, and lifting up his eyes he beheld a solemn phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground toward him." It was the last of the spirits, the ghost of Christmas yet to come. "Although well used to ghostly company by this time, Scrooge feared the silent shape so much that his legs trembled beneath him, and he found that he could hardly stand when he prepared to follow it. . . ."

He recovers, and with his ghostly companion proceeds to the business portion of the city. There he overhears some of his business associates laughing and joking about the death of someone they all knew, and with a thrill of horror Scrooge at last realises that it is he they are talking about.

The Phantom then takes him to where his body is lying, and Scrooge is horror-stricken at the callous way it is being treated. In a thieves' den he watches the apportioning of all his personal belongings, including even the shirt that had been used as a shroud, but which had been stolen. The miserable man, almost demented, demands of the Phantom: "Let me see some tenderness connected with death, or that dark chamber, Spirit, which we left just now will be for ever present to me."

The ghost conducts him along several streets, and they entered Bob Cratchitt's home. They found the mother and children seated round the fire, quietly mourning the death of Tiny Tim, their little cripple boy. The last straw comes when the Phantom takes him to a graveyard, where Scrooge locates and reads his own epitaph.

In his agony he swears he will forsake his old mean ways and devote the rest of his life to doing good in the world. "Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost."

Of Scrooge's subsequent reformation little need be said, except that it was complete, and by it he fully atoned for his previous way of life. "Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. . . . It was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, "God bless us, every one!"