

Stave 4 - The Last of the Spirits

THE Phantom approached, in a deep black garment, which left nothing of it visible save one boney hand.

“I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?” said Scrooge. “You are about to show me shadows of the things that will happen. Is that so, Spirit?”

Scrooge’s legs trembled beneath him.

“Ghost of the Future!” he exclaimed, “I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But I know your purpose is to do me good, and I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?”

It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight ahead.

“Lead on!” said Scrooge. “Lead on! The night is precious time to me, I know. Lead on, Spirit!”

The Phantom moved away.

They were in the heart of the city; amongst the merchants; who hurried up and down, and chinked the money in their pockets, as Scrooge had seen them often.

The Spirit stopped beside one little knot of business men, pointing to them, Scrooge advanced to listen to their talk.

“No,” said a great fat man with a monstrous chin, “I don’t know much about it. I only know he’s dead.”

“When did he die?” inquired another.

“Last night, I believe.”

“What has he done with his money?”

“I haven’t heard,” said the man with the large chin, yawning. “It’s likely to be a very cheap funeral, for I don’t know of anybody to go to it.”

“I don’t mind going if a lunch is provided,” laughed one gentleman.

Scrooge knew the men, and looked towards the Spirit for an explanation.

Scrooge fancied that the Unseen Eyes were looking at him closely. It made him shudder, and feel very cold.

They went into a dirty part of town where the shops and houses reeked with filth and misery.

There was a shop where greasy junk was bought. Scrooge and the Phantom came into this shop of Old Joe’s, just as two women and a man carried in bundles, laughing.

The man produced his plunder first. A pencil-case and a brooch were all. Old Joe added up his prices, upon the wall.

“I know those things,” Scrooge said. “They are just like mine – and they are worth much more than this man is paying!”

“Who’s next?” said Joe.

Mrs. Dilber was next. Sheets and towels, two old-fashioned silver teaspoons, a pair of sugar-tongs, and a few boots. Her account was stated on the wall in the same manner. "I paid two shillings ten for teaspoons just like those," Scrooge objected.

"And now undo my bundle, Joe," said the next woman.

Joe dragged out a large and heavy roll of some dark stuff, the same fabric and color as Scrooge's bed curtains..

"Bed-curtains!" said Joe. "You don't mean to say you took 'em down, rings and all, with him lying there dead?"

"Yes I do," replied the woman. "Why not?"

"His blankets too?" asked Joe.

"Whose else's do you think?" replied the woman. "And that's the best shirt he had, and a fine one too. They'd have wasted it, if it hadn't been for me. Putting it on him to be buried in," she laughed. "But I took it off again."

Scrooge looked at a shirt just like his own shirt and listened in horror.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the same woman, when old Joe paid the three out. "This is the end of it, you see! He frightened every one away from him when he was alive, to profit us when he was dead!"

"Spirit!" said Scrooge, shuddering from head to foot. "I see, I see. The case of this unhappy man might be my own. - Merciful Heaven, what is this!"

He recoiled in terror, for the scene had changed, and now he almost touched a bed: a bare, uncurtained bed: on which, beneath a ragged sheet, there lay the body of this man.

He lay, in the dark empty house, with no one to say that he was kind to me in this or that. "Spirit!" he said, "this is a fearful place. Let us go!"

The Ghost conducted him to poor Bob Cratchit's house; and found the mother and the children seated round the fire.

Very quiet. The little Cratchits were as still as statues in one corner, with Peter, who had a book before him. The mother and her daughters were sewing. But surely they were very quiet!

The mother laid her work upon the table, and put her hand up to her face. "It must be past your father's time," she said.

Peter said, shutting up his book. "But I think he has walked a little slower than he used, these few last evenings, mother."

At last she said, "He used to walk with Tiny Tim upon his shoulder, very fast indeed. But he was very light to carry, and his father loved him so. Ah - there is your father at the door!"

She hurried out to meet him. Bob broke down all at once and cried. He couldn't help it.

They drew about the fire, and talked. Bob told them of the extraordinary kindness of Mr. Scrooge's nephew, whom he had scarcely seen but once. "I am heartily sorry for it, Mr. Cratchit," he said, 'and sorry for your good wife.' I am sure we shall none of us forget poor Tiny Tim—shall we?"

"Never, father!" cried they all.

“Spectre,” said Scrooge, “tell me what man that was whom we saw lying dead?”

The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come did not answer, but led him straight on, until they reached an iron gate.

A churchyard. Here, then; the wretched man whose name he had now to learn, lay underneath the ground

The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to one.

“Answer me one question,” said Scrooge. “Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?” He followed the finger, and read upon the stone of the grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE.

The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again.

“No, Spirit! Oh no, no!”

The finger still was there.

“Spirit!” he cried, tightly clutching at its robe, “hear me! I am not the man I was. Why show me this, if I am past all hope!”

For the first time the hand appeared to shake.

“Good Spirit,” he pursued, “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!”

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. The Phantom’s hood and dress shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

