

Prologue

Jacob Marley was dead.

That much is certain. There will be points during this story when a reader might wonder if in fact he was still alive or perhaps if it was merely a rumor that he had died. But rest assured that Jacob Marley took his last living breath in London on Christmas Eve 1836.

His lifeless body was laid to rest in a plain wooden coffin in a dank woodworking shop behind a mortuary. There were no flowers to brighten the mood, no somber organ music to mark the occasion, no friends or family sobbing at the loss of the dearly departed. The only ones in attendance were a dour undertaker, his young apprentice, and Marley's longtime business partner, Ebenezer Scrooge.

It is worth noting that in this very cold and dark room, on a snowy winter's day, there was nothing as cold and dark as the heart that beat inside Ebenezer Scrooge. As he looked down at the corpse of the man who had been his partner for as long as anyone could remember, there was no emotion or sense of loss.

If anything, Scrooge seemed annoyed at the necessity of having to come down to identify the body and serve as a witness at the funeral.

Marley's bony hands were folded just above his waist, his thinning hair had been pulled back, and his tiny spectacles rested on his pale, colorless forehead. He looked as if he might be asleep—except for two very notable exceptions. The first was the bandage that ran under his chin and was tied at the top of his head. This was not because of any wound or injury. It was to keep Marley's face from contorting in death. The second was the fact that, as was the custom, a copper penny had been placed on each of Marley's cold, dead eyes.

"Yes," Scrooge said with no hint of sadness in his voice. "Quite dead. As a doornail."

Scrooge looked out the open door and saw a team of black horses hitched to a gleaming black hearse. Steam continuously flowed from their nostrils into the cold December air. They would carry Marley's body to its final resting place.

Scrooge could scarcely entertain the thought that Marley might still impact his life from the grave. In fact, all he was thinking about was the waste of money this

extravagance represented. To his figuring, a simple wagon with a single horse could have done the job for less money.

Although Scrooge had no warmth in his heart for his dead partner, or for any living person for that matter, there was one thing he loved: money. His entire life had been dedicated to earning and holding on to as much money as possible. He was very good at it and had become a wealthy man.

He also begrudged every penny that left his greedy fingers. That explained why Jacob Marley's funeral was taking place in a woodworking shop surrounded by half-finished cabinets and barrels rather than in a funeral home.

There was no minister with a sermon, and Scrooge was not about to give a eulogy, so the only official duty that needed to be attended to was the signing of the death certificate. The undertaker handed the document to Scrooge, who examined it carefully before scrawling his wretched signature across the line marked *Executor*.

When he handed the document back to the undertaker, Ebenezer had an uneasy look about his face. Something was upsetting him. This emotion, however, had nothing to do with the passing of Jacob Marley and everything to do with the passing of money from him to

the undertaker. His craggy fingers reached into his purse and painfully pulled out three coins to pay the man.

Oh, what a tightfisted, squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner this Scrooge was! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck a spark of warmth. This cold within him froze his features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheeks and made his eyes red and his lips blue.

Those thin, blue lips were closed as tight as his purse as he handed the money to the undertaker. They remained that way until the young apprentice started to close the lid on the coffin.

"Stop! You fool!" Scrooge barked.

Both the undertaker and his apprentice stepped back. They thought that maybe this horrid man was finally ready to show an appropriate emotion. They wondered if he wanted to take one last look at his friend. Maybe he wanted to whisper some earthly farewell.

Scrooge sneered at them in disgust, reached over and plucked the copper pennies off the dead man's eyes.

The two men watching him gasped, but Scrooge cared not one bit. He slipped the money into his purse and turned his cold red eyes toward theirs.

“Tuppence,” he said, using the English term for two pennies, *“is tuppence!”*

Scrooge did not even give his dead partner a final look! He just turned and went out into the snowy afternoon.

As Scrooge walked back to his office, he was surrounded by the sights and sounds of the holiday. Green garlands and Christmas wreaths hung in every doorway. Last-minute shoppers and street vendors crowded the narrow cobblestoned streets. Children and carolers assaulted his pointy ears with their joyous laughter and singing.

It was almost more than he could bear.

He saw two young boys secretly grab hold of the back of a passing carriage. It pulled them along the icy bricks as if they were on skates. They were as happy as could be at their little game, but Scrooge just shook his head in disgust.

“Delinquents!” he muttered as he continued his trek along Whitechapel High Street.

If Scrooge hadn't been in such a hurry to get back to his office and earn some more money, he might have noticed an amazing occurrence. Despite the fact that

Whitechapel was the poorest section of London, the people were surprisingly happy. They didn't have much, but the spirit of Christmas had moved them to celebrate what was good in their lives.

Although Scrooge undoubtedly had more money than any of the people he pushed by that Christmas Eve, he was also the least happy. It is no coincidence that the word miser, which is used to describe someone who is stingy with his money, also contains the first five letters of the word miserable. Both of these words described Ebenezer Scrooge.

But what did he care? He liked to edge his way along the crowded paths of life, his cold, heartless eyes warning everybody to keep their distance. It would take much more than the spirit of Christmas joy to warm the heart of Ebenezer Scrooge.

And, for the next seven years, no one even tried.