

A Song of Redemption

BY RICHARD G. WILKINS

CHARLES DICKENS' short novella, *A Christmas Carol*, is a masterpiece of English literature revered by many for its central role in reviving (and reinventing) English (and American) Christmas traditions. Unknown to many, however, is that Dickens' "little 'Carol'" was conceived as "A Plea To The People Of England On Behalf Of The Poor Man's Child." Underlying the fable of Ebenezer Scrooge and Tiny Tim is a biting critique of a society that dismissed humanity in the quest for economic efficiency. But Dickens' solution for this still ongoing tragedy was not the creation of judicially enforceable individual rights for Tim. Rather, the answer was a more intimate (and perhaps more necessary) focus on the communal responsibilities of Ebenezer.



F. Lee Jones



December 17, 1843, a slim red volume with gilt edges and hand-colored lithographs first appeared in London bookstalls. The little volume was Charles Dickens' masterpiece *A Christmas Carol*. The world—and Christmas—have never been the same.

Few readers 160 years later realize that this short book is perhaps responsible for saving the Christmas holidays from extinction. Following the English Civil War in 1642, the Puritans abolished the holiday.¹ Although the English monarchy was later restored, Christmas—with its carols, feasting, and warm good-heartedness—was not similarly refurbished and went into further decline with the coming of the Industrial Revolution.² Indeed, G. K. Chesterton, in his introduction to the 1924 edition of *A Christmas Carol*, observed, "If a little more success had crowned the Puritan movement of the seventeenth century, or the Utilitarian movement of the nineteenth century," the old holiday traditions would "have become merely details of the neglected past, a part of history or even archaeology. . . . Perhaps the very word *carol* would sound like the word *villanelle*" (italics added).^{3,4}

But English Christmas traditions survive—and have been transplanted to America—because of what Dickens fondly called his "little 'Carol.'" Michael Hearn, notes that Dickens must be "credited with almost single-handedly reviving the holiday customs."⁵ Hearn, in fact, relates that by the time of his death, "Dickens had already secured so sure a place in the mythology of the holiday that a story circulated about a little costermonger's girl in Drury Lane who, on hearing of his funeral, asked, 'Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?'"⁶

Considering the book's historical setting and its effect on English and American

Christmas traditions, it is fascinating that when he took pen in hand, Dickens did not have the restoration of "those golden days of yore, when Christ's Mass was a high day,"⁷ as his primary goal. Rather, he wrote the book to strike a blow against child labor and a suffocating lack of education among the poor. Indeed, some months prior to the publication of the *Carol*, Dickens had promised to write a pamphlet entitled "A Plea To The People Of England On Behalf Of The Poor Man's Child."⁸ The *Carol* became his plea.

The plea was sorely needed in 1843. The conditions of the poor—particularly the children of the poor—were intolerable. Dickens was incensed by reported descriptions of parish orphans and other children of the destitute, employed generally at seven years, some as young as three, who were brutalized, ill-fed, and ill-clothed during their 15- to 18-hour workdays. Equally appalling was the uniform lack of educational opportunities afforded the poor. In early 1843, Dickens assisted a wealthy friend and philanthropist in distributing funds to the Ragged Schools of Field Lane, Holborn.⁹ These schools existed to provide some meager training, but even this endeavor seemed nearly futile. As Dickens wrote:

To gain [the students'] attention in any way . . . is a difficulty, quite gigantic. To impress them, even with the idea of a God, when their own condition is so desolate, becomes a monstrous task. To find anything within them . . . to which it is possible to appeal, is at first, like a search for the philosopher's stone. . . . My heart so sinks within me when I go into these scenes, that I almost lose the hope of ever seeing them changed. Whether this effort will succeed, it is quite impossible to say.¹⁰

On October 5, 1843, as Dickens was formulating his social tract attacking child labor and ignorance, he was invited to give an oration at a fund-raising soirée for the Manchester Athenaeum, a charitable institution for the working class. Dickens began his oration by congratulating the people of Manchester for creating the Athenaeum, a place where “the immortal mechanism of God’s own hand, the mind, [would not be] forgotten in the din and uproar [created by] the whirl and rattle of machinery.”¹¹ The high purpose of the Athenaeum, Dickens stated, was to provide “a little learning” and, therefore, “self respect.”

*[T]his I know, that the first unpurchaseable blessing earned by every man who makes an effort to improve himself in such a place as the Athenaeum is self-respect—an inward dignity of character which once acquired and righteously maintained, nothing, no, not the hardest drudgery, nor the direst poverty, can vanquish. Though [a man] should find it hard for a season even to keep the wolf of hunger from his door, let him but once have chased the dragon of ignorance from his hearth, and self-respect and hope are left him.*¹²

Thus, according to Dickens, once the “dragon of ignorance” was “chased . . . from [the] hearth,” even the cold, hard specter of want would recede and be replaced by “self-respect and hope.” But how was such an end to be achieved? By educating each individual that he or she is part of an interdependent community. The more a man learns: the better, gentler, kinder man he must become. . . . Understanding that the relations between [men] involve a mutual duty and responsibility, he will discharge his part of the implied contract cheerfully, faithfully, and honourably; for the history of every useful life warns him to shape his course in that direction.¹³



Dickens, in short, argued that society would improve and mankind would flourish, not when men and women were imbued with sufficient rights to facilitate full autonomy, but rather when educated members of the polity recognized the reciprocal benefits flowing from mutual obligations.

Newspaper accounts report that the speech was greeted with shouts and a thunderous ovation.¹⁴ That night as Dickens left the Trade Hall, his “mind still burning with thoughts of Ignorance and Want and the necessity of throwing himself upon the truthful feelings of the people,”¹⁵ he determined the form in which he would deliver his “Plea To The People Of England.” He would write the *Carol*. Dickens spent the night in Manchester

pacing his room, and upon returning to London he “wept and laughed and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner in the composition, and thinking whereof he walked about the black streets of London, fifteen and twenty miles many a night, when all sober folks had gone to bed.”¹⁶

The rudimentary plot came from Dickens’ earlier writings.¹⁷ The prototype was his short story “The Goblins Who Stole A Sexton,” in which goblins reveal scenes of Christmas cheer to an “ill-tempered grave digger named Gabriel Grubb.”¹⁸ However, unlike the goblin story, *A Christmas Carol* is infused with the communitarian message and hope in mankind so forcefully delivered at the Athenaeum. Although Scrooge and



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neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE.*

Tiny Tim dominate the tale, they are but lenses through which Dickens focuses his plea to the people of England.

Scrooge is initially presented in broad, melodramatic strokes:

*Oh! But he was a tight-fisted band at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, . . . 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.*¹⁹

But Scrooge is more than a cardboard cutout.

For all his hard-heartedness, he was not an unfair man or employer. Contrary to many contemporary retellings, Scrooge is never portrayed as taking an undue advantage. He paid Bob Cratchit 15 shillings a week—the common and customary wage for clerks at the time. Moreover, Scrooge's grumbles regarding Bob's request for Christmas day off were hardly extraordinary: in 1843 most workers were denied the day off. Thus, once past the disagreeable adjectives, Scrooge is presented as no more (but no less) than the ultimate rational economic man: the definitive businessman who fixes the value of all human relationships by a single measure—profit.

As a result, when Scrooge's nephew hails him on Christmas Eve with a hearty, "[M]erry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" Scrooge's reply is a muttered, "Bah! Humbug."²⁰

"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.

"What else can I be . . . 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 . . . every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of bolly through his heart. He should."²¹

Because his only goal is finding himself several "hours richer" at the end of Christmas day, Scrooge disregards any broader communal obligations. But mere economic efficiency does not blind his nephew. When challenged to explain "what good" Christmas had ever done him, the nephew replies:

There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare

*say . . . Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round . . . as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely. . . . And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"*²²

Scrooge, of course, will have none of it, and after taking his "melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern; and having read all the newspapers, and beguiled the rest of the evening with his banker's-book, went home to bed."²³ There, stripped of his accounts, pens, rulers, and other outward symbols of economic success—clothed only in his dressing gown, slippers, and a nightcap—he confronts the end result of an independent, profitable, but isolated life: the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley.

Scrooge, the utilitarian, first asserts that Marley is nothing more than indigestion or a bit of swallowed toothpick.²⁴ But after a fearful wail from the ghost, Scrooge drops to his knees for a learning moment.

"Man of the worldly mind!" [said] the Ghost, "do you believe in me or not?"

"I do," said Scrooge. "I must. But why do spirits walk the earth, and why do they come to me?"

"It is required of every man," the Ghost returned, "that the spirit within him should walk



*familiar with one old ghost, in a white waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to its ankle, who cried piteously at being unable to assist a wretched woman with an infant, whom it saw below, upon a door-step. The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever.*²⁶

The sequence—and consequence—of the spirits that thereafter visit Scrooge are well known. From the Ghost of Christmas Past, who appears in the ambiguous form of a young boy (or is it an old man?), Scrooge learns, as he watches himself dismiss love as “an unprofitable dream, for which it happened well that [he] awoke,”²⁷ that commitment may be more important than self-regard. From the Ghost of Christmas Present, garbed in green and resplendent in holly, Scrooge discovers that family (and community) are more sustaining than a bankbook: Bob Cratchit, despite poverty, toasts his hearth and hold with a hearty “Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!”²⁸ Tiny Tim, in his famous echo of that toast, reinforces the essential interdependence of all humanity: “God bless us, every one!”²⁹

Here, at the midpoint of the tale, and following Tiny Tim’s simple but eloquent toast, Dickens delivers the same message he presented at the Manchester Athenaeum. As the Ghost of Christmas Present departs, he brings forth the twin demons of Want and Ignorance.³⁰ Scrooge, faced with the wan specters of the Girl Want and the Boy Ignorance is warned, “Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.”³¹

The import of this pivotal warning is brought forcibly to Scrooge’s—and to our—attention by the last Spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come. That specter, draped in black, forces all of us to confront the consequences of a solitary, independent life: Scrooge’s corpse is plundered by thieves who, like himself, pursue their own utilitarian ends. On the other hand, Tiny Tim, who was part of the unprofitable but intensely interdependent community known as the Cratchit family, is mourned with a more potent (and lasting) mixture of sorrow and joy:

abroad among his fellow-men and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world . . . and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness.”

“You are fettered,” said Scrooge, trembling. “Tell me why?”

“I wear the chain I forged in life,” replied the Ghost. “I made it link by link, and yard by yard. . . . Is its pattern strange to you? . . . Or would you know . . . the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself?”

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” faltered Scrooge. . . .

“Business!” cried the Ghost. . . . “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! . . . Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me!”*³²

At the conclusion of this interview, the departing Marley presents Scrooge with a vision of the opportunities lost by a self-centered focus:

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley’s Ghost. . . . Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He had been quite

"And I know," said Bob, "I know, my dears, that when we recollect how patient and how mild he was; although he was a little, little child; we shall not quarrel easily among ourselves, and forget poor Tiny Tim in doing it."

"No, never, father!" they all cried. . . .

"I am very happy," said little Bob, "I am very happy!"³²

In contrast to the sustaining strength flowing from Tiny Tim's passing, all that is left of Scrooge and his economic success is a barren graveyard. Faced with this reality, Ebenezer Scrooge at last understands that a meaningful life requires more than untrammelled pursuit of individual ends:

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

"Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point," said Scrooge, "answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be, only?"

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead." . . . "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

The Spirit was immovable as ever.

Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE.

"Am I that man . . . ? No, Spirit! Oh, no, no! . . . I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been. . . . Why show me this if I am past all hope? . . . Good Spirit, intercede for me! Assure me that I may yet change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life! 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!"³³

Scrooge, of course, does change. And Tiny Tim does not die. But there is more to this happy ending. There is a prescription for the evils that besought England in 1843 and, I suggest, for the similar evils that plague 2002.

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* during the heyday of England's infatuation with laissez-faire liberty. Scrooge is not merely an

isolated miser, he is the personification of the social ills that produced the miser. As Michael Hearn has written:

*Scrooge does not merely express the ideas of popular political cant, . . . but also his character is motivated by its hardhearted facts.*³⁴

Scrooge's shortcomings, therefore, were essentially those of English society. By showing how Scrooge ultimately overcame those failings, Dickens marked a way out for England as well. Scrooge's transformation taught a utilitarian world, obsessed with the efficient creation and maintenance of wealth, how it could once again gain sight of the human soul. The *Carol* taught that pursuit of liberty—without more—makes money, but not a decent society.

Some may suppose that this economic message is all there is to the *Carol*. There is more. The essential flaw in Ebenezer Scrooge—and in English society—was not that he (or it) valued economic liberty. He, and that society, simply valued that liberty too much. Economic liberty is a good thing. But it is not the *only* thing. Scrooge's focus on economic liberty as the only legitimate social value resulted in his bitter isolation rather than Bob Cratchit's friendly hearth.

America in 2002 is replicating an analogous evil. We are, I fear, walking the same path as Ebenezer Scrooge. We no longer lay our offerings on the altar of economic liberty worshipped by old Ebenezer. No, our current infatuation with self-centeredness is more sophisticated: we idolize not economic efficiency but rather autonomy and individual "rights." This modern focus on isolation and unfettered liberty, however, does little to distance us from Mr. Scrooge.

Old Ebenezer was not only the ultimate economic man; he was also the ultimate autonomous rights-bearer. Talk about autonomy! Talk about rights! He had both—and to spare. According to Dickens, even *nature* could not touch him. "External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, nor wintry weather chill him."³⁵

Scrooge also had the same answers that are given, in only slightly more palatable form, by modern civil liberty utilitarians. When confronted by charitable solicitors for the poor, Scrooge rebuffs them with the

observation that he pays his taxes to support the prisons and the poorhouses and that "those who are badly off must go there."³⁶ To the simple invocation of human pity that "[m]any can't go there; and many would rather die," Scrooge comes forth with the classic utilitarian reply: "If they would rather die, . . . they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."³⁷

This same answer, now draped in the all-too-enticing garlands of autonomy and individual liberty, is given with distressing frequency by the modern world. We once cherished even the most marginal members of our communities simply because they were human and alive—and we sanctified this norm with the force of law. Unborn children, the aged, the elderly, and the infirm—without exception or legal, medical, economic, or philosophical quarrel—could rely upon the bedrock rule that all human life is sacred. But no longer. No more. Modern due process jurisprudence, cloaked in the rhetoric of rights, all too often gives the same answers as old Ebenezer³⁸: the marginal members of this society had better die, and decrease the surplus population.³⁹ Dickens was clearly incensed by such reasoning. As the Ghost of Christmas Present chides Scrooge: "Oh God! To hear the insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust."⁴⁰

Thus, while the modern solution for troubled pregnancies and the difficulties associated with age, illness, and despair is dressed in more fashionable garb than Scrooge's harsh rhetoric, the message is the same. Modern society, when confronted with social ills closely analogous to the sweatshops and ragged schools that prompted Dickens' "Plea To The People Of England," has tersely responded that such matters are individual problems that must be resolved by the individual sufferers. Not only that, society itself has no business intervening to protect and sustain life. How like old Ebenezer.

Dickens gave an answer for the ills engendered by untrammelled economic liberty in 19th-century England. The same answer goes a good part of the way toward solving the problems of today. As Dickens informed the Athenaeum and reiterated at length in the *Carol*, "relations between