

SYNOPSIS CHRISTMAS CAROL adapted from Charles Dickens' story by Paul Stebbings
and Phil Smith for TNT theatre.

A book is opened – A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, Carol singers sing as one of them starts to read the story – which comes to life in front of the audience.

Ebenezer Scrooge is sitting in his cold office on Christmas Eve. He bullies his poor clerk, Bob Cratchit. Scrooge's nephew, Fred, comes to visit his Uncle. Fred wishes Scrooge a Merry Christmas and is met with contempt – Scrooge hates Christmas with its useless generosity and human warmth. Scrooge only cares for making money and Christmas interferes with that – he calls Christmas a “humbug!” – meaning a hypocritical waste of time. Fred tries to change his Uncle's opinion and invites him to Christmas Dinner with the family but without success. The clerk, Bob Cratchit can do nothing to help even though he agrees with his employer's opinion that Christmas is the best time of the year – God Bless Christmas – is Fred's parting line.

Three ladies collecting for charity enter. They try to persuade Scrooge to donate to the poor who deserve some Christmas cheer. But Scrooge is very hard – he even suggests that the poor had better die to “decrease the surplus population”. He throws the charity ladies out of his office shouting “Humbug!”. Bob Cratchit has to beg to have Christmas Day off to be with his poor family – we learn about his crippled son, Tiny Tim.

Scrooge leaves his office and walks back through the cold streets with his bank books as company for a lonely Christmas day ahead of him. It is dark and foggy in the streets of London. As he approaches his house he sees the face of his long dead partner, Jacob Marley, where the door knocker should be. Scrooge shakes his head – surely this cannot be a ghost?

Scrooge enters his house and feels a strange energy – he looks around and sees nothing but then is suddenly surprised by a figure wrapped in chains and a safe. It is the Ghost of his partner, Jacob Marley – a man just as mean and miserly as himself. Marley terrifies Scrooge and, despite Scrooge's sarcasm and resistance, warns him to change his ways and reject cold money for human warmth. Marley warns him that he will be visited that night by three Ghosts. Marley vanishes – back to the place of punishment that he deserves for his mean and inhuman life.

Scrooge dismisses the vision and tries to sleep – but the clock makes strange noises and suddenly he is woken by a bright light – the Ghost of Christmas Past is in the bedroom. The Ghost takes Scrooge on a journey through his childhood and youth, times when Scrooge was not as hard and merciless as now. Scrooge is touched when he recalls his sister Fanny, who dies young and was so full of life. He remembers Mr Fezziwig, his first employer, who held wonderful parties, especially at Christmas. And above all Scrooge remembers his only love, Belle. The Ghost allows Scrooge to meet all these people and relive his past – Scrooge begins to have human emotions again. But he cannot change his opinions. When Scrooge meets Belle he is shaken to his core. He has to relive the terrible day that Belle gave back his engagement ring and cancelled their wedding day – all because Scrooge, even as a young man, was mistreating his tenants and worshipping gold above love. Scrooge begs for a second chance but it is too late – he breaks down in tears – at last he is questioning his inhuman beliefs.

Scrooge wakes up in his bed – the clock seems to have stood still – then suddenly another ghost appears – The Ghost of Christmas Present – this jolly Ghost takes Scrooge on a journey

around London on Christmas day – they fly over the city seeing rich and poor alike enjoy this special day. They visit the house of his nephew, Fred, and see the family playing Christmas games and really enjoying themselves – laughing kindly at Scrooge for his refusal to join them – Scrooge realises he does want to join them – but it is only a vision and he cannot cross into their world. Then the Ghost takes him to see the poor Cratchit family – Bob is paid so little by Scrooge it is a very humble party – and a small dinner. He sees Bob's crippled son, Tiny Tim, laughing and joking even though he is poor and crippled. He sees Bob's wife curse Scrooge for paying his clerk so badly – Bob tries to defend Scrooge as he can hate nobody – but it is a sad scene, especially when Tiny Tim has a coughing fit and the parents worry that he might die. Scrooge is moved, and promises to the ghost that he will help Bob and his family. The Ghost is not impressed with Scrooge's change of heart – he must truly change and he suspects him. So the Ghost shows him a terrifying vision of an evil boy who is hidden in Father Christmas's present sack. The child represents all of Scrooge's selfish and cruel beliefs – he is a mixture of ignorance and despair and he will grow up and destroy London and the whole world if he cannot be changed. He quotes Scrooge: "Let the poor die!" Scrooge is terrified and runs to hide in his bed as he is now – mysteriously – back in his bedroom.

Once again the clock strikes one – it seems no time has passed and the third and most terrifying ghost appears. This is the Ghost of Christmas Future. It has no form or body but is a cold musical presence. The Ghost presents visions of the future to Scrooge – which at first the old miser does not understand. Scrooge sees two very mean businessmen discussing the death of a stranger and how they will only go to the funeral if they are fed well – the stranger had no friends. Then he sees two tenants go to the house of a cruel landlord and to beg for relief. No one answers the door so they go in to discover their landlord alone and dead in his bed. Instead of mourning they shout with joy.

Then Scrooge sees robbers enter the house and strip the dead body of clothes and steal anything they can find in the house of the abandoned corpse. No one seems to care for the stranger in life or death.

Finally he sees Bob Cratchit and his wife at the grave of their son, Tiny Tim. Scrooge begs the Ghost to know if this is a certain vision of the future or only what might be. He receives no comfort. Scrooge is back in his bed seeing this vision of the tragic funeral of the poor child when he overhears the Cratchits talking about another grave – that Tiny Tim will be buried next to the man who knew no love and warmth, who was far poorer than the crippled child who lived a short life of happiness and love. Scrooge realises with horror that he is not in his bed but his grave and, that he was the stranger who was mocked and robbed in death and that he will die, unloved on Christmas day. He passes out with a cry.

Scrooge wakes in the morning – it was all a dream – or was it? He has changed – he goes out into the streets and is delighted to find it is Christmas morning. He meets his tenant, Mr O'Flynn (who appeared in his vision) and releases him from debt and asks him to buy everything for a wonderful Christmas party that Scrooge intends to celebrate. He meets the charity ladies and offers them a lot of money for the poor, he meets his nephew Fred and warmly accepts his invitation to Christmas family dinner and finally he meets Bob Cratchit with Tiny Tim and raises his clerk's salary, wishes him happy Christmas and says he hopes to become a second father to his crippled son. Scrooge is changed by the magic of Christmas. Everyone is happy on this most special of Christmas Days!

Paul Stebbings paul@tnt-theatre.net