

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens

Opening extract from

Stave 1: Marley's Ghost

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt what-ever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to.

Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowl-edge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wis-dom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Mar-ley was as dead as a door-nail.

Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend, and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain. The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot — say Saint Paul's Churchyard for instance — literally to astonish his son's weak mind.

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as Scrooge and Mar-ley. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him.

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind- stone, 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; se-cret, and self-contained, 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; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature al-ways about with him; he iced his office in the dogdays; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often 'came down' handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with glad-some looks, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No beggars implored him to bestow a tri-fle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs ap-peared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, 'No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!'

But what did Scrooge care! It was the very thing he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance, was what the know-ing ones call 'nuts' to Scrooge.

The Call of the Wild by Jack London

Opening extract from

CHAPTER 1: INTO THE PRIMITIVE

Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not alone for himself, but for every tide-water dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego. Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal, and because steamship and transportation companies were booming the find, thousands of men were rushing into the Northland. These men wanted dogs, and the dogs they wanted were heavy dogs, with strong muscles by which to toil, and furry coats to protect them from the frost.

Buck lived at a big house in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley. Judge Miller's place, it was called. It stood back from the road, half hidden among the trees, through which glimpses could be caught of the wide cool veranda that ran around its four sides. The house was approached by gravelled driveways which wound about through wide-spreading lawns and under the interlacing boughs of tall poplars. At the rear things were on even a more spacious scale than at the front. There were great stables, where a dozen grooms and boys held forth, rows of vine-clad servants' cottages, an endless and orderly array of outhouses, long grape arbors, green pastures, orchards, and berry patches. Then there was the pumping plant for the artesian well, and the big cement tank where Judge Miller's boys took their morning plunge and kept cool in the hot afternoon.

And over this great demesne Buck ruled. Here he was born, and here he had lived the four years of his life. It was true, there were other dogs, There could not but be other dogs on so vast a place, but they did not count. They came and went, resided in the populous kennels, or lived obscurely in the recesses of the house after the fashion of Toots, the Japanese pug, or Ysabel, the Mexican hairless,—strange creatures that rarely put nose out of doors or set foot to ground. On the other hand, there were the fox terriers, a score of them at least, who yelped fearful promises at Toots and Ysabel looking out of the windows at them and protected by a legion of housemaids armed with brooms and mops.

But Buck was neither house-dog nor kennel-dog. The whole realm was his. He plunged into the swimming tank or went hunting with the Judge's sons; he escorted Mollie and Alice, the

Judge's daughters, on long twilight or early morning rambles; on wintry nights he lay at the Judge's feet before the roaring library fire; he carried the Judge's grandsons on his back, or rolled them in the grass, and guarded their footsteps through wild adventures down to the fountain in the stable yard, and even beyond, where the paddocks were, and the berry patches. Among the terriers he stalked imperiously, and Toots and Ysabel he utterly ignored, for he was king,—king over all creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller's place, humans included.

His father, Elmo, a huge St. Bernard, had been the Judge's inseparable companion, and Buck bid fair to follow in the way of his father. He was not so large,—he weighed only one hundred and forty pounds,—for his mother, Shep, had been a Scotch shepherd dog. Nevertheless, one hundred and forty pounds, to which was added the dignity that comes of good living and universal respect, enabled him to carry himself in right royal fashion. During the four years since his puppyhood he had lived the life of a sated aristocrat; he had a fine pride in himself, was even a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become because of their insular situation. But he had saved himself by not becoming a mere pampered house-dog. Hunting and kindred outdoor delights had kept down the fat and hardened his muscles; and to him, as to the cold-tubbing races, the love of water had been a tonic and a health preserver.

And this was the manner of dog Buck was in the fall of 1897, when the Klondike strike dragged men from all the world into the frozen North. But Buck did not read the newspapers, and he did not know that Manuel, one of the gardener's helpers, was an undesirable acquaintance. Manuel had one besetting sin. He loved to play Chinese lottery. Also, in his gambling, he had one besetting weakness—faith in a system; and this made his damnation certain. For to play a system requires money, while the wages of a gardener's helper do not lap over the needs of a wife and numerous progeny.

Excerpt

From *The Twenty-Three* by Linwood Barclay

ONE

I know I won't be able to get them all. But I hope I'll be able to get enough.

DAY ONE

TWO

Patricia Henderson, forty-one, divorced, employed at the Weston Street Branch of the Promise Falls Public Library System as a computer librarian, was, on that Saturday morning of the long holiday weekend in May, among the first to die.

She was scheduled to work that day. Patricia was annoyed the library board chose to keep all of the town's libraries open. They were slated to close on the Sunday, and on the Monday, Memorial Day. So, if you're going to close Sunday and Monday, why not close for the Saturday, too, and give everyone at the library the weekend off?

But no.

Not that Patricia had anywhere in particular to go.

But still. It seemed ridiculous to her. She knew, given that it was a long weekend, there'd be very few people coming into the library. Wasn't this town supposed to be in the midst of a financial crisis? Why keep the place open? Sure, there was a bit of a rush on Friday as some customers, particularly those who had cottages or other weekend places, took out books to keep them occupied through to Tuesday. The rest of the weekend was guaranteed to be quiet.

Patricia was to be at the library for nine, when it opened, but that really meant she needed to be there for eight forty-five a.m. That would give her time to boot up all the computers, which were shut down every night at closing to save on electricity, even though the amount of power the branch's thirty computers drew overnight was negligible. The library board, however, was on a "green" kick, which meant not only conserving electricity, but making sure recycling stations were set up throughout the library, and signs pinned to the bulletin boards to discourage the use of bottled water. One of the library board members saw the bottled water industry, and the bins of plastic bottles it created, as one of the great evils of the modern world, and didn't want them in any of the Promise Falls branches. "Provide paper cups that can be filled at the facility's water fountains," she said. Which now meant that the recycling stations were overflowing with paper cups instead of water bottles.

And guess who was pissed about that. What's-his-name, that Finley guy who used to be mayor and now ran a water bottling company. Patricia had met him the first—and she hoped, *last*—time just the other evening at the Constellation Drive-in. She'd taken her niece Kaylie and her little friend Alicia for the drive-in's final night. Kaylie's mom – Patricia's sister Val – had lent her their minivan, since Patricia's Hyundai was a little too cramped for such an excursion. God, what a mistake that turned out to be. Not only did the screen come crashing down, scaring the little girls

half to death, but then Finley showed up, trying to get his picture taken giving comfort to the wounded.

Politics, Patricia thought. How she hated politics and everything about it.

And thinking of politics, Patricia had found herself staring at the ceiling at four in the morning, worried about next week's public meeting on "Internet filtering." The debate had been going on for years and never seemed settled. Should the library put filters on computers used by patrons that would restrict access to certain websites? The idea was to keep youngsters from accessing pornography, but it was a continuing quagmire. The filters were often ineffective, blocking material that was not adult oriented, and allowing material that was. And aside from that, there were freedom of speech and freedom to read issues.

Patricia knew the meeting would, as these kinds of meetings always did, devolve into a shouting match between ultraconservatives who saw gay subtext in the *Teletubbies* and didn't want computers in the library to begin with, and ultra left-wingers who believed if a kindergartner wanted to read *Portnoy's Complaint*, so be it.

At ten minutes after five, when she knew she wasn't going to get back to sleep, she threw back the covers and decided to move forward with her day.

She walked into the bathroom, flicked on the light, and studied her face in the mirror.

"Ick," she said, rubbing her cheeks with the tips of her fingers. "ABH."

That was the mantra from Charlene, her personal trainer. Always Be Hydrating. Which meant drinking at least seven full glasses of water a day.

Patricia reached for the glass next to the sink, turned on the tap to let the water run until it was cold, filled the glass and drank it down in one long gulp. She reached into the shower, turned on the taps, held her hand under the spray until it was hot enough, pulled the long, white T-shirt she slept in over her head, and stepped in.

She stayed in there until she could sense the hot water starting to run out. Shampooed and lathered up first, then stood under the water, feeling it rain across her face.

Dried off.

Dressed.

Felt—and this was kind of weird—*itchy* all over.

Did her hair and makeup.

By the time she was in her apartment kitchen, it was six-thirty. Still plenty of time to kill before driving to the library, a ten-minute commute. Or, if she decided to ride her bike, about twenty-five minutes.

Patricia opened the cupboard, took out a small metal tray with more than a dozen bottles of pills and multivitamins. She opened the lids on four, tapped out a calcium tablet, a low-dose aspirin, a vitamin D, and a multivitamin, which, while containing vitamin D, did not, she believed, have enough.

She tossed them all into her mouth at once and washed them down with a small glass of water from the kitchen tap. Moved her upper body all around awkwardly, as though her blouse were made of wool.

Patricia opened the refrigerator and stared. Did she want an egg? Hard-boiled? Fried? It seemed

like a lot of work. She closed the door and went back to the cupboard and brought down a box of Special K.

“Whoa,” she said.

It was like a wave washing over. Light-headedness. Like she’d been standing outside in a high wind and nearly gotten blown over.

She put both hands on the edge of the counter to steady herself. *Let it pass*, she told herself. *It’s probably nothing. Up too early.*

There, she seemed to be okay. She brought down a small bowl, started to pour some cereal into it.

Blinked.

Blinked again.

She could see the “K” on the cereal box clearly enough, but “Special” was fuzzy around the edges. Which was pretty strange, because it was not exactly a tiny font. This was not newspaper type. The letters in “Special” were a good inch tall.

Patricia squinted.

“Special,” she said.

She closed her eyes, shook her head, thinking that would set things straight. But when she opened her eyes, she was dizzy.

“What the hell,” she said.

I need to sit down.

She left the cereal where it was and made her way to the table, pulled out the chair. Was the room spinning? Just a little?

She hadn’t had the “whirlies” in a very long time. She’d gotten drunk more than a few times over the years with her ex, Stanley. But even then, she’d never had enough to drink that the room spun. She had to go back to her days as a student at Thackeray for a memory like that.

But Patricia hadn’t been drinking. And what she was feeling now wasn’t the same as what she’d felt back then.

For one thing, her heart was starting to race.

She placed a hand on her chest, just about the swell of her breasts, to see if she could feel what she already knew she was feeling.

Tha-thump. Tha-thump. Tha-tha-thump.

Her heart wasn’t just picking up the pace. It was doing so in an irregular fashion.

Patricia moved her hand from her chest to her forehead. Her skin was cold and clammy.

She wondered whether she could be having a heart attack. But she wasn’t old enough for one of those, was she? And she was in good shape. She worked out. She often rode her bike to work.

She had a personal trainer, for God's sake.

The pills.

Patricia figured she must have taken the wrong pills. But was there anything in that pill container that could do something like this to her?

No.

She stood, felt the floor move beneath her as though Promise Falls were undergoing an earthquake, which was not the sort of thing that happened often in upstate New York.

Maybe, she thought, I should just get my ass to Promise Falls General.

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