

The Second of the Three Spirits

by Charles Dickens *from A Christmas Carol*

A Christmas Carol is the classic story of rich and miserly Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge hates Christmas, hates happiness, hates kindness, and hates people. He is visited on Christmas Eve by the ghost of Marley, his dead business partner. Marley tells Scrooge that three spirits will visit Scrooge that night. It is Scrooge's last opportunity to redeem himself rather than suffer Marley's fate. Marley is doomed for eternity to drag heavy chains around the earth because of his selfishness and greed. In this passage, Scrooge is with the second of the spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Present. The spirit has taken him to visit the various Christmas celebrations and homes. This is the end of the spirit's visit.

It was a long night, if it were only a night; but Scrooge had his doubts of this, because the Christmas holidays appeared to be condensed into the space of time they passed together. It was strange, too, that, while Scrooge remained unaltered in his outward form, the Ghost grew older, clearly older. Scrooge had observed this change, but never spoke of it until they left a children's Twelfth-Night party, when, looking at the Spirit as they stood together in an open place, he noticed that its hair was grey.

'Are spirits' lives so short?' asked Scrooge.

'My life upon this globe is very brief,' replied the Ghost. 'It ends tonight.'

'Tonight!' cried Scrooge.

'Tonight at midnight. Hark! The time is drawing near.'

The chimes were ringing the three-quarters past eleven at that moment.

'Forgive me if I am not justified in what I ask,' said Scrooge, looking intently at the Spirit's robe, 'but I see something strange, and not belonging to yourself, protruding from your skirts. Is it a foot or a claw?'

'It might be a claw, for the flesh there is upon it,' was the Spirit's sorrowful reply. 'Look here!'

From the foldings of its robe it brought two children, wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. They knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment.

'O Man! look here! Look, look down here!' exclaimed the Ghost.

They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish, but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale

and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.

Scrooge started back, appalled. Having them shown to him in this way, he tried to say they were fine children, but the words choked themselves, rather than be parties to a lie of such enormous magnitude.

'Spirit! are they yours?' Scrooge could say no more.

'They are Man's,' said the Spirit, looking down upon them. 'And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware of 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. Deny it!' cried the Spirit, stretching out his hand towards the city. 'Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse! And bide the end!'

'Have they no refuge or resource?' cried Scrooge.

'Are there no prisons?' said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. 'Are there no workhouses?'

Questions

1. The Spirit say the children “are Man's.” Explain what this means.
2. Why do you think the children were hiding in the Spirit’s robe?
3. The boy is called Ignorance. What does the boy represent?
4. Previously in the book, a gentleman had visited Scrooge’s office to ask for a donation for the poor and needy. Scrooge had asked sarcastically, “Are there no prisons?” He inquired if the workhouses were “still in operation.” He then refused to donate. The Spirit uses almost the same words here when Scrooge asks about refuge and resource. Why do you think the Spirit answered Scrooge with his own words?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. Condensed
2. Unaltered
3. Observed
4. Brief
5. Intently
6. Abject
7. appalled

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

- 1) "It was a long night, if it were only a night; but Scrooge had his doubts of this, because the Christmas holidays appeared to be **condensed** into the space of time they passed together."
- a. lengthened b. stretched c. packed d. distributed
- 2) "It was strange, too, that, while Scrooge remained **unaltered** in his outward form, the Ghost grew older, clearly older."
- a. unchanged b. different c. handsome d. older
- 3) "Scrooge had **observed** this change, but never spoke of it until they left a children's Twelfth-Night party...."
- a. studied b. noticed c. ignored d. investigated
- 4) "'My life upon this globe is very **brief**,' replied the Ghost. 'It ends tonight.'"
- a. long b. fun c. sad d. short
- 5) "'Forgive me if I am not justified in what I ask,' said Scrooge, looking **intently** at the Spirit's robe, 'but I see something strange...'"
- a. with confusion b. with curiosity c. with attention d. with sadness
- 6) "From the foldings of its robe it brought two children, wretched, **abject**, frightful, hideous, miserable."
- a. hopeless b. hopeful c. cute d. sweet
- 7) "Scrooge started back, **appalled**."
- a. Confused b. shocked c. embarrassed d. ashamed