

-A Christmas Belle
 R Cantrell
 General audience
 Experimental literary mash-up

A Christmas Belle

Being the Ghost of A Yet Older Ghost Story by C.D.

The Spirits of imagination, heart, and hope inspire their own seasons and witness and are not bound to slavish order by Present, Future or Past. Thus the ghost story has been quite shamelessly sampled, re-vantaged, and re-told through other eyes, by your faithful friend and servant,

R.C.

The First Peal

Were one a ghostly spirit, or to have consorted with such, in the steam driven and gas lit age of an older England, the streets of London would have proven narrower, her river mistier, her air smokier, as in a dream seen through a crude and thick glass window pane. That ghost or that consort, floating above the grey slush of snow on the narrow walks might have peered into the parlour window of any of the old Town's middling classes to see the life and light that passed there within.

In a room, neither very large nor handsome, but full of comfort, lit by early evening candle and hearth-light, a comely matron sat opposite her daughter. Around their feet swarmed and swirled a veritable herd of children, younger than the maiden, every child conducting itself like forty. No one seemed to mind the uproar, indeed the mother and daughter enjoyed it, laughing heartily. The youthful miss began to mingle with the mirth of her younger siblings and was soon pillaged by the young brigands most ruthlessly.

Oh, to have been one of them, though not to have been so rude! Not for the wealth of the world to have crushed that braided hair and torn it down; and for the precious little shoe, not to have plucked it off, God bless the soul, to save one's life.

To measure her waist in sport as they did, to have touched her lips, to have questioned her, that she might have opened them; to have looked upon the lashes of her downcast eyes, and never raised a blush; to have let loose waves of hair, an inch of which would be a keepsake beyond price: in short, to confess, to have the lightest license of a child, and yet to have been man enough to know its value.

But now a knocking at the door was heard and such a rush immediately ensued that she, with laughing face and plundered dress was borne towards it, the center of a flushed and boisterous group just in time to meet her father, who came home attended by a man laden with Christmas toys and presents. Ah, and what an onslaught was made on that defenseless porter! Scaling him with chairs for ladders to dive into his pockets, despoil him of brown paper packets, hug him around the neck, and pommel his back in irrepressible affection! The shouts of wonder and delight with which the development of every package was received! The joy, the gratitude, and the ecstasy are all indescribable alike. By degrees the children are gotten out of the parlour, and by one step at a time, up to the top of the house, where they went to bed, and so subsided.

The master of the house, having his daughter leaning fondly on him, sat down with her and her mother at his own fireside.

"Belle" said the husband, turning to his wife with a smile, "I saw an old friend of yours this afternoon."

"Who was it?"

"Guess."

"How can I? Tut, don't I know?"

“Mr. Scrooge.” Belle stopped for an instant, her face softening slightly from a bright smile to a more wistful visage. “Mr. Scrooge it was”, the husband continued, “I passed his office window, and as it was not shut up and as he had a candle inside I could scarcely help seeing him.” Belle’s gaze strayed to the window whose panes framed the even-dark sky, swirls of snow whirling by at whiles, and on, into the street and the dark and the cold outside their warm and cozy abode. “His partner lies upon the point of death, I hear, and there he sat alone. Quite alone in the world, I do believe.” Belle sat looking at the reflected light in the window and saw there spectral fragments of faces from her memory, feeling almost as if they were immediately present and looking back in at her. She quietly communed with these spirits, until in a while the spell was broken as she noted that her daughter had pressed the extinguisher-cap down upon the high-burning candle. For an instant the light streamed out from under it, flooding upon the floor.

“Mother, will you go to bed now? Father went up a while ago.”

“Yes, Maria, dear, I shall go along directly”

Her daughter giggled, “He kissed you on the cheek, you know?”

Belle absently raised her hand to her own cheek and touched it gently. “Who?”

“Well, Father, of course. Mother, I declare that sometime you are a great goose.”

She was just upon the point of giggling again when, in the obliquity of the remaining dim light from the hearth, she could tell that her mother’s eyes were full, as if upon the brim of letting fall a tear. Indeed, though Belle had turned slightly away at that instant her daughter saw the diamond sparkle of the firelight on her mother’s cheek.

Her playful chiding was replaced in an instant by poignant concern. “Oh, Mother!” she cried, “I did not mean to cause you pain!”

“Oh, no Maria. No child”, she reassured. “I was just flushed, that’s all.”

“Mother, is there anything the matter?” the girl asked, her arm around her mother’s waist, laying her head against her bosom. Belle, fully returned to the small room, looking about her at the sturdy table, and the strewn field of the late hilarious battle of her children, and to the cozy hearth, held her beautiful child close and replied in a most heartfelt response, “No, there is nothing wrong. I have *everything* I could want in my life.”

“And...and you and Father are happy?”

“Most happy, my dear. Why ever should you ask?”

“You were far away, for a moment.”

“For a moment, perhaps. But here I am. And I love you, and your brothers and sisters, and your Father. I only hope that one day you can be quite as happy with your own home.”

“Mother?” Maria raised her head, but still clung tightly to her mother.

“Yes?”

“Mother, I’ve met a boy. A young man.”

“Maria!” Belle said, her hand now touching Maria’s cheek, her gaze now searching the girl’s eyes in the firelight. Her tone, though hushed, was a fruition of joy, fear, hope, admonition, encouragement, and question; a recipe for that one word preparing in her heart for the last seventeen years.

“His name is Azariah.”

“Azariah.”

“Azariah Lockhart. You’ve seen him at church. His family’s pew is opposite ours but one row back.” Even at her tender age Maria had been astute enough to know that her mode of introduction had reassured her mother.

“And what does young Mister Lockhart look like?” teased Belle. “Is he most handsome?”

“Most!” Maria answered breathlessly. “He is tall and slender and has the *most* intelligent, eager blue eyes.”

“And,” Belle pursued, taking care to maintain the same insouciant, playful tone, “what are the prospects of the intelligent and eager Mr. Lockhart?”

“He is embarking upon a life in commerce. In corn trade mostly, I think. I believe Father knows of his father and uncles who are on the Exchange”, Maria reassured her.

“The Exchange?”

“Yes Mother. He works ever so hard! Everyone is certain he will make a brilliant success.”

As sensitive and as mature as Maria was for her years, she had not an inkling of the tiniest catch in her Mother’s voice as Belle hugged her close again and whispered, “No doubt. No doubt. Oh, I hope for your joy.” Then she took a deep breath and sat up, wiping away both her tears and Maria’s and said in a happy but businesslike tone. “Well...then. Shall we soon meet our young Mister Lockhart?”

Deep in the night Belle’s husband felt her toss and turn, her eyelids squeezing, and once utter a small sound of pathos. When he had asked in the morning, she had said, laughing and reassuring him in his concern for her, “Oh, twas nothing, perhaps a poorly digested bit of last night’s feast. I can’t remember”, and happily changing the subject, by way of leading him to the main thing, she had begun by asking if he knew (as she knew he did) a family named Lockhart.

In the quiet of the morning, when he had gone off to The City whistling a happy holiday air, and the children were playing contentedly with their new and wonderful toys, she sat in the window box and remembered indeed; remembered the dream that had come to her in the night, a dream and a memory of a time long ago. It seemed she could feel the

very weight of the dark velvet of the mourning-dress she had worn on that occasion as a young girl, as she sat by a man in the prime of his youth, could feel again the heat of the tears which had welled in her eyes then, and could see the eager, greedy, restless motion in his. His face had not then the harsh and rigid lines she heard it had taken on in his later years, but had already begun even then to wear the signs of care and avarice.

"It matters little," she said, softly. "To you, very little. Another idol has displaced me; and if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve."

"What idol has displaced you?" he rejoined.

"A golden one."

"This is the even-handed dealing of the world!" he said. "There is nothing on which it is so hard as poverty; and there is nothing it professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth!"

"Perhaps you fear the world too much," she answered, gently. "All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you. Have I not?"

"What then?" he retorted. "Even if I have grown so much wiser, what then? I am not changed toward you."

She shook her head.

"Am I?"

"Our contract is an old one. It was made when we were both poor and content to be so, until in good season, we could improve our worldly fortune by our patient industry. You *are* changed. When it was made, you were another man."

"I was a boy", he said impatiently.

"Your own feeling tells you that you were not what you are," she returned. "I am. That which promised happiness when we were one in heart, is fraught with misery now that we are two. How often and how keenly have I thought of this, I will not say. It is enough that I *have* thought of it, and can release you."

"Have I ever sought release?"

"In words. No. Never."

"In what then?"

"In a changed nature; in an altered spirit; in another atmosphere of life; another Hope as its great end. In everything that made my love of any worth or value in your sight. If this had never been between us," she said, looking mildly, but with steadiness, upon him; "tell me, would you seek me out and try to win me now? Ah, no!"

He seemed to yield to the justice of this supposition, in spite of himself. But he said with a struggle, "You think not."

"I would gladly think otherwise if I could," she answered, "Heaven knows. When I have learned a Truth like this, I know how strong and irresistible it must be. But if you were free today, tomorrow, yesterday, can even I believe that you would choose a dowerless girl—you who, in your very confidence with her, weigh everything by Gain: or choosing her, if for a moment you were false enough to your one guiding principle to do so, do I not know that your repentance and regret would surely follow? I do; and I release you. With a full heart, for the love of him you once were."

He seemed about to speak, but with her head turned from him, she resumed, "You may—the memory of what is past half makes me hope you will—have pain in this. A very, very brief time and you will dismiss the recollection of it, gladly, as an unprofitable dream, from which it happened well that you awoke. May you be happy in the life you have chosen!" She left him, and in her dream, as in her memory, they parted.

It was the parental work of but a few days to see to it that a proper invitation was issued to Young Mr. Lockhart to attend a formal holiday season dinner given by Belle and her husband, the guests to include several of their old accustomed friends. On the evening of the affair, Maria was positively beside her self with joy and anxiety, attending most scrupulously to her toilette. Her dress, while not in the least ostentatious, was a perfect fit and in a color which set off her eyes and complexion to very best advantage. Though her hair was in itself quite lustrous enough to be fetching undressed or with a plain ribbonette, it was adorned more ornately this evening to her perfect satisfaction, largely due to her Mother's tender and artful ministrations. As her father came to her room to fetch her down to meet the assembled guests she took the deepest reassurance regarding her appearance from his positively beaming visage and the way he gently squeezed her hands and nodded as he looked at her from head to toe. "You look lovely. Just as your Mother did the night I met her." Indeed, now it was his turn to feel the welling in his eyes, but certes unashamedly. As she depended upon her father's arm to float her down the stairs, her attention was all on the upturned face of young Lockhart. He cut a splendid figure in a fashionably tight dark velvet coat and serge trousers. As the stated purpose of the gathering had nothing to do with the plans or feelings of the young people (as they were not yet even properly introduced, let alone a betrothed couple) everyone privy to the real situation (including Belle herself) patiently maintained the genteel fiction that they actually cared a farthing about the magnificent roast and pudding that Belle had so brilliantly and lovingly created. Finally however, the meal was successfully completed and the brandy and tiny cordials handed round mingling with conversations in the parlour, and the young people had a chance to stand together and converse more directly.

“Miss Maria, may I be allowed to say how radiant you look?” She blushed and for an instant feared that her heart’s pounding would be heard to the neighbor’s and back, drowning all further conversation.

“How kind of you to say so, Mr. Lockhart. And if I may say so, your tailor has done a magnificent job of it. Your coat is cut so...strongly.”

“Do you like it, Miss Maria? It is quite the latest thing in the City. De rigueur for doing business on the Exchange.”

“I understand that you are in factoring, Mister Lockhart. As is my dear father, though certainly in only a small way. I have never had a head for the mental prestidigitations required. Though it sounds quite interesting.”

“It is, most interesting. Most engaging. Why, I can already see that within a very short time one might declare one’s business and establish one’s self securely. Arbitrage of delinquent cross-border corn futures alone will yield an amazing profit. Not to mention the margins to be got on Crown tax assemblage. It’s all quite exciting!”

“Oh, I’m sure, Mr. Lockhart.”

“One might expand one’s sphere and found one’s own grand house all based upon trade!”

“Oh Yes, Mr. Lockhart! A grand house, I’m sure.”

“Miss Maria,...” he said, turning to her and looking into her eyes, “will you do me the honor of addressing me by my Christian name, Azariah?”

“But of course!... Azariah.”

Now Belle approached, with little Adelaide in her arms. “How lovely to have you with us this evening, Mr. Lockhart.”

“The pleasure is mine, Ma’am.” Maria still at his side, beamed at her mother.

"Your mother and father are well?" asked Belle.

"Quite well, thank you."

Adelaide stretched out her arms to Maria to hug her around the neck and give her a kiss on the cheek. Then the child turned and for an instant her eyes uncertainly met those of Lockhart. Still supported by her mother, she stretched forth her tiny arms toward him. Belle noted the minute tension in his jaw line and how his eyes darted first one way and then the other before resting on Maria, a tight smile coming to his thin lips. He allowed the child to hug his neck, Belle almost hearing the count in his mind, before he retreated, a duty done.

"Do you have brothers and sisters, Mr. Lockhart?" Belle queried naturally. She felt it was not false of her to ask what she already knew from having particularly noticed the family the week before in the parish church.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Oh?" There was a moment of silence and then it seemed Azariah realized something more might be required of him on the subject.

"A sister. "

"Oh?" Again there was a silence, this time however nothing more was forthcoming from Young Lockhart. "... How nice." Maria continued to smile, but with a touch of chagrin.

At that moment the other children, who had been shined and buffed and lovingly combed and who were maintaining their own quiet supper upstairs in the nursery were brought down, in as orderly a manner as it is possible to accomplish with such an energetic troop, to be introduced to the company and to say good night to their parents and older sister.

Later, the little ones replaced above stairs, Belle and Maria stood talking to the other ladies about fashions and colics and other domestic concerns. Belle had made it a point to take a station from which she might also hear at least snatches of the conversations of the group of gentlemen gathered analogously around her husband; talk of trade and contracts and the price of pecks and barrels, specie and ingots, of ships and tariffs, tonnage and imposts. It was clear that Mr. Lockhart, as young as he might be, and as otherwise reticent, was rather forward in his enthusiasms and opinions on these subjects.

Then she heard him speak a name that suddenly drew all of her attention from one of the ladies' description of the travail of dealing with the greengrocer.

"I for one" firmly averred young Mr. Lockhart, "think Mr. Scrooge quite the best example of the thoroughly modern man of business." Belle heard, without turning her head toward the male clique, the subtle sound of her husband's throat clearing, a habit to which she could assign the meaning of mild irritation and disagreement too polite to voice further. Young Lockhart, not so subtle, nor familiar however, continued his diatribe and lecture to these indulgent elders.

"I have made quite a study of the subject and find that fully 6% of the profits available upon 'Change as a whole are wasted, simply frittered away."

"Indeed?" retorted one of the group, a bemused look on his face.

"Indeed, Sir. If one is to look at the rate of defaults in corn contracts alone, many hundreds of pounds per week are slipping through the hands of the rightful and legal owners."

One of the company observed, "But that 'slippage' as you perhaps rightly call it, is tradition. If the market were to demand absolute and constant reconciliation, not one man in three would but be ruined at one time or another. We would bring down a judgment upon ourselves."

“Piffle, sir! Piffle. As to the failures, as Mr. Scrooge so sagely opines, ‘So much the better’. With the weaker sisters out of the markets, those with a more natural title of ability would be able to keep a firmer hand upon the tiller of commerce.”

“Well speaking of ‘tillers’, only last year one of my firm’s regular clippers on the Caligat run was lost on the home leg, cargo and crew and anchor and all, and after providing some relief for the families, and satisfying the preferred creditors, we would have defaulted and failed. But our friends, including Mr. Farrington here,” he paused and bowed from the waist to one of the other gentlemen in the group, who in return responded with a nod and a smile, “I say our many friends sat down with us and we came to equitable understandings and in time the debts were met and the bills paid off and we are all still here and all the better for it, I think.”

“Ah, but if Mr. Farrington had but acted rationally”, young Lockhart offered coolly, “you would no longer be available to compete with his firm, having been naturally weeded out by the imprudence of your investment, to the future advantage of Farrington and Company. Am I not right Mr. Farrington?”

The said Farrington looked gravely from under his gray and bushy brows at the bright youth. “I recognize the argument. An old one. And admittedly quite full of logic... on its face. So your man Scrooge, and his unfortunate associate Mr. Marley, would maintain, no doubt.”

Lockhart nodded emphatically at the point. “Indeed. Mr. Marley it was who inculcated this strong thinking in Mr. S.”

“But young man, it is a long life and not all turns of the cards are to be seen at one hand. I remember back in ’04, when the whole of the market was like to have crashed for fear that French Nappy and his Frogs would hop the Manche, it was this same Mr. Dunderidge’s Stock Company”, here, in return, he bowed just as deeply toward his

competitor, “that sustained us all through a terrible summer, propping up the markets with the cash they had and which the rest of us lacked at the time. And it has ever been so upon ‘Change. You lend the Devil a farthing in the morning that you might have it back again at night.” Here he winked broadly at his fellows in the circle and raised his brandy snifter to a round of “Hear, hears” and good-natured laughter which only seemed to discomfit the young object of the lesson. There was not, Belle noted as she turned discretely, a trace of a smile on that handsome face. She worried because she was sure that the benefits of the gentle lesson would be lost upon him, and by extension upon Maria as well.

It was quite late before the guests had been seen out and “Merry Christmases” bestowed upon one and all, including Azariah, who merely nodded as he put on his fashionable stovepipe and gave Maria’s hand a rather perfunctory squeeze at their parting upon the step. She gazed after him for some time before Belle discretely opened the door to find her there, her eyes shining, but for all that, shivering alone in the cold nonetheless.

“He’s quite handsome,” noted Belle, wrapping a shawl about Maria’s shoulders as she led her in. As they began the manifold small tasks attendant upon reclaiming the field of joyous battle, picking up the crockery, dealing with the leftovers (a very small quantity to be sure), returning the furniture to its normal format instead of the cleared space where dancing and blind man’s buff had taken place. Here in the corner were the piled cushions that had served Maria’s brother Ted and their younger siblings as the walls of a mighty fortress, where they had survived cruel siege (at one point running dangerously low on supplies of fruit-cake and sweet syllabub), assaulted by the squadrons of lead soldiers their father (in the role of The Grand Despotick Turk) had brought in, wrapped in gay foil, and arrayed to subdue them.

Maria was quiet and as she went about these tasks she would stop, perhaps a wine glass in hand, smiling at something only she could see, considering some vision of the

future that Belle understood (remembering her own girlish dreams and self-absorbed musings at a similar time in her own life) to be unalterably bright and unclouded.

“And what are you seeing?” Belle asked gently. Maria blushed and ducked her head so that her Mother might not see what she knew must’ve been quite a fatuous smile. But then she turned, and looking from under her long lashes, said hopefully, “He loves me Mother. And I him.”

Belle could sense that Maria was using her mother’s reaction as a fine weight in the balance as she scrupled her way through the whirling maze of thoughts that such a time and emotion bring on. “I don’t doubt that”, said Belle. She walked a fine line; it was not her place to dash the untried hopes of her daughter’s first love. Neither, however, was it right that she would not make available to Maria the real example of her own experience. But, she thought, looking introspectively, what exactly had her experience been? Had she made a sound decision, or one that was craven and faithless? While she had “known” that Young Ebenezer Scrooge would turn away from her with time, it had after all been her, not him, who had made that declaration and eventuated the dissolution of their contracted engagement. Might he have turned back to a gentler path if only for her sake if she had remained committed and resolute in her attachment to him; if only she had not abandoned the poor youth? At the memory she felt a palpable ache in her chest, her eyes closed and her brow furrowed.

“Mother? What are *you* seeing?

“Are you *very* sure about this? Azariah is indeed handsome, indeed very intelligent, indeed an unimpeachably honorable young man...”

“But...”

“If I may speak to you frankly. I am confused Maria.”

“Confused?”

"When I was your age, perhaps a bit younger, I was engaged to be married. Before I knew your father. You knew that?"

"Yes. But I have never known the particulars."

"Perhaps the particulars are most important now. The man to whom I was engaged was Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge."

"Mother! I never dreamed..."

"Indeed. Our own, Azariah's own, Mr. Scrooge. Ebenezer was much like Azariah, quite handsome, in those days, before the lines of care marked him so. And always so intelligent. His mind always working, working."

"But what happened? What brought about your break? Was it something...dark?"

Belle turned and faced her daughter. "If by dark...you mean something shameful or dishonorable, another connection, no. It was nothing of the sort. I believe Ebenezer would have been quite faithful." Here Belle, stopped, and seeing that past again, this time clearly enough to describe it to Maria, "But no," she continued, "that is not quite true." Maria waited breathlessly for her mother to continue her explanation. "I did accuse him of displacing me with another idol."

"Another idol?"

"A golden one," explained Belle.

"Ah. And you see Azariah in the same mold."

"I fear it, yes."

"Mother. That was your life. That was Mr. Scrooge. Well I know that Azariah can be preoccupied with...business. But is not the business of we women to serve as the modulating, the moderating, the beneficent influence? I would not want a man who had not the bowel to make a way in the world for both us and for our children to come."

“You believe then that you have the strength of your own character to sufficiently influence his? It is a great gamble, for you stake your own future, and that of those children of whom you speak, on its turn. Ebenezer feared nothing so much as the possibility of poverty; he called it ‘the even-handed dealing of the world’. I believed, in that moment, that he feared it too much. And that is why we parted.”

“Mother!”

“And now you are standing upon just such a precipice. You are a girl, no, a woman now, of sound heart and mind. It is for you to make your own decision. And I tell you that though I made mine, I am not without doubt about it even to this day.”

Once again, later that night, Belle’s good man felt her shifting about under the weight of her dreams as much as the weight of their bedclothes. Behind those eyelids played out the magical theater of light and shadow in a play of the past, the present and the future.

Belle saw Maria when she was still quite small, no older nor bigger than Adelaide was now. The air was light as young springtime and she recognized an old accustomed greensward where she and the child used to cavort. Because Maria was her firstborn there had always been a special connection, as of intuition, that she felt for the girl. In her vision she could once again see Maria rise upon tiny, unsteady feet, with the same joy and fear that the child might have felt had she suddenly risen from the ground to the level of the lower branches about them in true flight; she first stood and swayed, then steadied, and then holding out her arms to Belle who sat a few feet away encouraging her, she moved one foot and then the other. Clearly to Belle it was in that very instant that Maria knew what it meant to walk. It was a great rush of emotion as Maria took the three or four steps to be enfolded in her laughing Mother’s arms. She had walked, and thus in a trice had entered

into the larger world outside the infant bond. What joy to know that the whole of the world and of her future lay ahead of her! A healthy, beautiful child, she had now taken that high hedge, that initial step, toward becoming all that she would dream and imagine and finally become in her own right.

Then the vision seemed to dance along through the next several years, images plucked at whiles like random flowers picked on an afternoon's walk in the countryside. Belle began to recognize the clarity of recent events, including her interview with Azariah Lockhart, and all that had transpired at the dinner party earlier that same evening.

And then the images went on, as though down a road into what Belle sensed to be the foreshadowed future. There was a very formal celebration taking place, in their own accustomed parish church, and Maria was swathed most beautifully in a flowing gown of white, clinging to a bouquet of flowers. Then Maria opening the door to a fashionable house and entering to take possession of the foyer. Then a series of mornings and afternoons, the sun slanting first one way and then the other as it crept silently across the polished wood of the floor. And finally Maria, now some years older, sitting before a mirror, quietly regarding herself, but more than just her face, which though still quite young, was undoubtedly beginning to take on small lines of disappointment around the corners of her mouth. Belle's dreaming spirit rose as Maria did, and followed her as she made her way down an ornate, but empty hallway in the late afternoon light. It was quite silent throughout the entire house except for the distinct ticking of a huge and formal grandfather cabinet clock on the landing. Maria stopped at a particular room near the head of the stairs, and slowly opening the door, stood looking in without entering herself.

It came to Belle in this dream that there was now a faint glimmer from Maria's cheek as a tear rolled down and was thrown into frission against the fading and lifeless light; there

was a sob like the cry of one falling into the darkness of a well. Belle woke in the midst of the night and breathed a prayer for her daughter.

A Christmas Belle
R Cantrell
General audience
Experimental literary mash-up

Synopsis- Belle Winter was once engaged to Ebenezer Scrooge, but broke off the engagement because she saw him, as a young man, first becoming hard hearted and too concerned with making his fortune. Now her daughter Maria is engaged to a protégé' of Scrooge's, Azariah Lockhart, and Belle fears that Maria may be entering upon a marriage that will be cold and joyless.

The Second Peal

Belle rose quite early, and after attending to the household, dressed in her best day-dress, hat and gloves, and set out for the City. She trusted that Maria would look after the younger ones in her absence, and she knew Maria was in her room because the light of her candle had remained visible under the door all through the night.

At its beginning, even if somewhat remarkable for Belle, her journey still maintained the cloak of propriety that any housewife going into the mercantile precincts might have; she could have been going to settle a bill with the greengrocer, or ordering a particular piece of cloisonné furniture from an importers shop. But as she proceeded down the narrower and narrower, less retail streets, into the thickening fog, she felt more and more out of her own element, much as she might have had she found herself in a heathen jungle

or amidst treacherous and shifting ice floes on an expedition to the high latitudes. But like a determined explorer she pressed on. The windows frowned at her, with their struggling candles behind, palls of dirt and formal inscriptions announcing the various tenants; “Bundly Trawl and Fidge- Import-Export Factors”; “Ponsonby Pilkington and Company, Commercial Creditors”; “Phipps-Actuary”, and on the sidewalks, narrow and covered with a film of damp gray grit, not one of the few grim, gray men who passed so much as looked up at her. The chill of the precinct reached her very bones.

Finally she reached her destination. At the end of a commercial mews where the meager sunlight never seemed to penetrate in any case, sat a looming warehouse, the beetling brow of a heavy façade above the establishment’s door, and on the glass of that door was painted, in small, black, formal letters: Scrooge and Marley. Just that, and no more.

She closed her eyes, swallowed as best she could, and applied her small, gloved hand to the ponderous knob of the dark door. She entered to find herself in a small tank-like antechamber, which was occupied by a single clerk. The room was as cold, nay colder, than the sidewalk outside, and Belle could see a fire in the grate that seemed to consist of but a single coal. The clerk was a man of sound frame and early-middling years, sitting upon a very tall stool at his very small desk, wearing his battered top-hat, his neck swathed in a threadbare white muffler, and caught in the very act of attempting to warm his stiff fingers by the heat of his meagre desk candle. Looking up and seeing a slender matron diffidently enter the premises, this clerk could not have been more astonished had young Queen Victoria herself deigned to pay the establishment an extempore visit to drive a bargain in corn prices. For an instant Belle thought that he might actually have been bodily frozen, with his jaw slightly agape, left forgotten through the most recent onslaught by winter chill upon the City.

"Ahem," Belle coughed demurely. "Excuse me." She waited and in but three or four seconds was rewarded with the thawing and response of the clerk. It was not an unpleasant greeting, as along with the look of disbelief and uncertainty, there was at least the admixture of a smile, and his voice was kind. "Yes, Ma'am? May I be of service?" At that smile, she was reminded of the tiny fire in the grate bravely trying to push back the surrounding cold.

There was a partially open door into the inner reaches of the establishment, and within could suddenly be heard a gruff version of Belle's attention-getting cough. The clerk instantly lost any semblance of his smile, indeed looking suddenly for all the world as if the inner sanctum perhaps housed some basilisk coiled and ready to come and flay the skin from his cold bones.

"I am," began Belle, retrieving the clerk's attention, "Mrs. Belle Winter". They heard the scrape of a chair from the inner room and a look of the most abject terror sprang to the visage of the clerk. As they heard a heavy foot tread apparently coming toward the door, Belle continued, "Nee, Beadnell." Suddenly the footfall stopped. They waited, the clerk relaxing slightly as the old dragon remained within his lair, and Belle realizing the terrible awkwardness of her position all the more acutely.

"If you please," she said to the clerk, pitching her voice loudly enough to be quite sure that the occupant of the inner room might hear her, and yet with supplicatory, rather than demanding tones. "If you please. I have come to see Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge, if ...if it is convenient."

"Yes Madam, of course. And may I tell Mr. Scrooge the nature of your business?" The two of them could hear the creak and feel the floorboards beneath them shift ever so slightly, as the occupant of the room, still behind its door and not ten feet from them

seemingly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, no more movement than that could either discern.

“It is of a personal nature,” she said hopefully. There was a pause of a mere second, and then in an equally subtle movement, they noted the door to be closed a fraction of an inch further, no more, by the unseen hand behind.

The clerk’s expression went as quickly from fear to pity at this sign as it had from wonder to fear at her entering. “Of course, Madam. I will see if Mr. Scrooge is in.” He dismounted his stool and went through the inner door, which was then softly closed behind him. He was within for some time; Belle was quite sure she could hear voices rising and falling. Then the clerk came back out, leaving the door slightly ajar. “I am sorry Madam, but Mr. Scrooge is not in at the moment.”

“Oh...”

“I *am* sorry.”

“Yes.” Belle’s expression was meant to convey absolution to the mortified attendant. “Perhaps,” she suddenly suggested, “I might leave a message for Mr. Scrooge... should he return.”

“Of course Madam.” They both felt, once again, the floorboards quietly tormented. The door began to swing closed the remaining few inches and Belle quickly said, “Tell Mr. Scrooge....” At that the door stopped, not yet quite completely closed. “Please say to Mr. Scrooge, that I have come to him in some degree of extremity.” The door began to close again, “But not,” she quickly interjected, “of a pecuniary nature, I assure you. That is, I would assure Mr. Scrooge.”

“Of course not, Madam,” the clerk reassured her.

“The matter entails some delicacy, and is a family matter.” She began awkwardly, looking at the door.

“Rest assured that I shall convey it with all due discretion.” At this, he simply and very pointedly stuck his fingers in his ears, and turned his back, so as to give her as much privacy as the situation would allow. Belle understood there was no way that he could actually withdraw from the room entirely without his employer being aware, the which, apparently, would have called down that harsh gentleman’s wrath upon his head.

“Please convey to Mr. Scrooge this message”, she began, speaking toward the door, “I have only undertaken to disturb his routine out of a torment that threatens my daughter. Her name is Maria, and she is a beautiful and normally sensible girl. The type of girl of whom I am sure Mr. Scrooge himself might be proud. The issue, however, is one of the heart.” Belle warmed to her subject. “She has fallen in love with a young man. A young man I might add, who is of good family to my certain knowledge. The problem, the issue I wish Mr. Scrooge to understand, is that this young man, a younger Mr. Lockhart, is a disciple of the principles of business, indeed of life, laid down by himself and Mr. Marley. While Mr. Scrooge knows the certain benefits to his ledgers of such a mode of living, I pray that he remember...that he consider, the likely effect that such a heart and such a mind bring to a home and a hearth, in short that he take some measure of pity on my daughter, though at a distance and vicariously, by having a word with Mr. Lockhart and perhaps swaying the young man’s heart away from that very coldest and hardest road whose first measures he has already begun to tread. I pray most fervently that he may do so for the sake of Mr. Lockhart, and for the sake of my daughter.” She paused for the length of a heartbeat, looking most intently at the doorway, still slightly ajar, open a bare inch to the sound of her voice and the effect of her hopes. At this there was no sound, no creaking of floorboards; the worthy clerk continued in his self-imposed aural sequestration, and could in fact be heard softly singing the chorus of “Good King Wenceslas”. “And tell him,” her words tumbled on “that she who was at one time at that very crossroad of hope and fear, of love

and sensibility, and who remembers yet every word and every look and every touch that passed at such a time asks him, nay begs him, to come to her aid now...for memory of that which they had when they were once one in heart." She waited, hearing, indeed seeing her own breaths in the frigid air. Once, twice, thrice the circumscribed cloud formed and dissipated. She heard her own heart knocking within her breast. Then slowly, as she watched, the door closed with a small 'snick' sound of the iron hardware. Her chin sank and her shoulders sagged in the ensuing silence. She felt the cold that surrounded her reach directly into her breast and lay its finger upon her heart. When she raised her eyes, she noticed the back of the clerk, faithful to his word, still standing opposite, his fingers plunged ludicrously, but deeply in his ears, not yet aware of her defeat. She advanced and touched him upon the shoulder to release him. He turned and slowly unstopped the portals of hearing. He did not need them, however, to be aware that their lady visitor had not had a happy interview with his employer. He helped the poor woman to the door and doffed his hat as he handed her out to the sidewalk. "Merry Christmas, ma'am", he whispered, and went back to his two-shilling-the-day desk.

Belle's spirit was as dark and foggy as the winter day around her. She knew not what to do nor whither to go now. She looked back at the old warehouse and it seemed quite sad and without hope. But, she thought, the clerk, as difficult as his life there must be, still retained the sensibility of a kind and generous man. As she looked back to see the tiny point of light that was that good man's candle, she noted haloed in the dingy glass between them the old appellation; Scrooge and Marley. Suddenly another hope, though a fearsome and frankly desperate one, came to her.

A discrete tap upon the same door brought the clerk back, and after a moment's quiet question, and a quickly scribbled paper from him, she started off again, this time with purpose in her step and her head held high. It was a quarter-hour's chilly walk into

precincts which, if possible, were even more grim and foreboding, until finally, consulting the good clerk's directions, she found herself, just as the City clocks were striking three in the failing afternoon, standing upon the sidewalk up a shadowed and forgotten yard in front of a lowering pile of building where not a single light showed from within; it was the mansion of Jacob Marley. The fog and frost hung about the black old gateway of the house in mournful meditation. There was a massive wooden door from which stood out a dour and uninviting brass knocker, and very large it was. As her small hand reached for the heavy ring which hung from this knocker, she paused. She tried to imagine upon what she was about to enter, what Mr. Marley might be like, as she had never met him.

She seized the knocker and let it fall once, twice, three times, each with an echoing, "boom". Nothing stirred, no light flared, no sound of footstep approached from within. "Am I then too late, even for this forlorn hope?" Belle questioned herself.

"'ere then! 'oo are you!" a harsh voice demanded from the bottom of the steps behind her. She turned about and was confronted with the vision of a slatternly woman with the unkempt dress and toilette of a zealous toper. "'ere!" the woman screeched yet again, "What are you about?"

Though the shrill creature was certainly intimidating, Belle recalled both her mission and her nerve in an instant and holding her head high and affecting a tone which while not unfriendly certainly brooked no dispute, "I am Mrs. Belle Winter. And I have come to see Mr. Jacob Marley. Are you, by chance, associated with the household staff?"

"'ousehold staff!" shrieked the harridan. The exclamation was then followed by a spasm of rough laughter that ended with a fit of deep coughing. "Lawks!" she choked out when she had recovered her breath. "Yes, Ducks, yes. I am 'associated with the staff'. I *am* the staff. And as for Mr. Jacob Marley," she said, now advancing to the door and pushing it open for Belle, "As for our Mr. M, if your business with him is to *your* advantage, you had

best hurry. If it's to *his*, well, just wait a bit, and you're likely to have a bit o' good news."

The old crone rubbed her chapped hands as she grinned in a macabre fashion up at the dark staircase. "Aye, Ducks, perhaps Mr. Marley's business is already concluded."

"May I...may I see Mr. Marley? Is he able to receive visitors?"

"Well, we can go up and see now, can't we?"

"Is there not anyone in attendance at his bedside? I was led to believe that he was in extremis. Is there then no one caring for him in his last hour?"

"Well, what do you think I am? I care for him. Yes I do. Have been, what did you say, Ducks? 'Associated with the staff', for these ten years. Never a word from him except, porridge is too cold, or not enough starch in the shirts. Well, the porridge is all gone cold and the shirts'll go to the rag factor before the next day breaks. Probblly fetch a groat or two. We'll see how's he likes that care. Hah!" She snapped her fingers at the unseen second floor. Seeing Belle hesitate, the crone turned to her and shooed her on up the staircase. It was but dimly lit by a tiny candle in a sconce near the top, but was quite wide enough to bring the hearse straight up at need. "Go on, Ducks. Mayhap you can give him some company on this next business trip of his." The old drab cackled to herself as she bustled off no doubt to rummage through the silver in the pantry, or more likely to take consult and comfort yet again with her minister in such times of trouble; The Right Reverend J. Barleycorn.

Belle advanced up the broad dark stairs as bravely as she could, taking the lone candle from the sconce and proceeding down the equally broad and dark hallway. Only one door showed any light underneath and that was of the faintest cast. She approached and tapped. Hearing an inchoate response, she tried the knob with no small degree of trepidation. It opened and the door swung ajar. She could see a single candle burned nearly to its base on a nightstand. In the midst of a huge four-poster bed, wearing a nightgown and

bed-cap, sitting upright with eyes that shown fierce and fevered in the glim, surrounded on the mattress itself by stacks of ledger-books and metal boxes, was propped an almost skeletal Jacob Marley.

“Stay away! Stay back, I say!” he hissed. “It’s not yours. It’s mine. It’s mine. All of it is mine!” He ran his hands over the stacks and their leather covers blindly, and seemed in the act, calmed. Belle advanced, careful to hold her candle high enough that the poor, ravaged man could see her face.

He began to gibber again, but she importuned him, “Mr. Marley, please, be at peace. I am not here to take anything from you.”

“Stay back. It’s not yours. I know what’s mine.”

“Mr. Marley. I am a friend. My name is Belle Winter. You have known my husband, I believe, at the Exchange.”

“The Exchange? Yes, the Exchange. I must get back ‘pon Change.” Then he was off on a rambling diatribe about current liabilities, statements of account, usance, and bills of exchange, as he tried with pathetic futility to gather up all the ponderous books and boxes. He was clearly dying. Belle looked about her and noted that the room was not only nearly dark and totally devoid of any life but hers and that which even as she watched was fleeting from Marley, but was also stringently cold. As cold, she reflexively thought, as the grave.

Suddenly Marley seemed to come somewhat more to his surroundings. “Who are you? Whom do you represent?” he asked, his hands raised almost as if to fend off a blow.

“I am Mrs. Winter. A friend.”

“Friend? What friend?”

“Mr. Marley. We have not met. But I bear you no ill-will and may perhaps be of some comfort and assistance in your...in your current difficulty.”

“Eh? You have a proposition? Commodities to trade? Corn? Lumber? Gold?” he asked feverishly.

She advanced with the intent of at least supplementing his thin, soaked nightgown with a blanket that was lying hard by. “Are you not cold?” The man was shivering now most violently.

“Cold? No. Not cold. Too hot. Augh! The heat. Augh! No!” He was once again staring wildly and perhaps bargaining yet again, but this time with the Shrewd Old Bargainer of souls. His breathing had the mucilaginous sound of a gumboot being pulled up out of calf-deep muck.

Looking about, Belle took a pewter goblet from the bed stand and filled it from a ewer standing nearby. She sat on the bedside and guided Marley’s burning hand to the vessel and the both to his parched lips. He drank thirstily. He gasped for a moment and then continued to pant as though running a foot race. He turned and finally she could tell that he was fully aware of her.

“Assistance to me?” he queried. Then instantly his eyes narrowed and his hands shot out to grope the ledgers. “What assistance? Upon what account? I wish to incur no more debits. My books are closed!”

“Mr. Marley I assure you I have no thought of money. This,” she indicated the boxes and ledgers, “is all yours and no one will try to take it from you.” A quibbling lie, she told herself, as she thought of the housekeeper and her ilk, swarming below-stairs even now. He seemed calmed again. “Mr. Marley, do you know a young man named Lockhart?”

“Lockhart?”

“Azariah Lockhart? He and his family know you from the counting house.”

“Lockhart? Young Lockhart, yes. Yes, I know him. Good man. Strong. Hard.”

"Yes. Strong. But...perhaps, too hard."

"Too hard? Piffle! Not a bit of it. Need more like him."

"But Mr. Marley, quite frankly I fear for...Mr. Lockhart."

"Fear for him? No, no one will best that one. He knows how the cow ate the cabbage. Knows what is his. How to keep it. How to keep it!" Again his hands roamed blindly over his companionable pelf.

"But at what cost to himself? And to those around him?"

"Those around him must look to themselves or be cast aside. For that is the iron law of the market place."

"But what will it gain him?"

"What...? Why, the whole world, if he is but sharp enough."

"But what then, Mr. Marley? What then?"

"What then? What then!" The poor man began to grope and gibber again. "What then?" His eyes were now seeing beyond the confines of the room, on toward some futurity known but to Mr. Marley himself and alone. "No!" he shrieked suddenly, "I cannot bear them. They are too heavy! Oh, they crush me! Crush me!" His breathing was now quite labored, as though he could not long muster the strength to raise his chest yet again. He was lying back now, soaked and wrung in the midst of his lucre.

"You and Ebenezer are his gods. Oh, could you have not inculcated some tiny glimmer of humanity, of fellow feeling in Azariah Lockhart?"

Belle gave the dying man another draught of water. Seeing his eyes glazing over and losing focus again, she understood that she was come too late to Mr. Marley to give effect to her original plan.

"Oh, but what can I do? My earthly accounts are closed." Marley gasped, perhaps no longer seeing his earthly visitor at all. "Save me!"

“Mr. Marley. It appears that you are beyond the ability to change events in this life. But I charge you, I implore you, to maintain yet some shred of hope, hope even beyond the grave.”

“Augh! Auuuugh! The weight!” cried Marley in a state of agitated agony. “I’ll do anything; any bargain, any note of hand, any terms. Help me!”

“I call upon you yet again, Mr. Marley.” Belle took the hand that flailed out blindly; it was as cold as impending death. “It is my heart in need of your help. Leave yours but open and I may yet call upon you. It may be the only hope for both of us.”

His breathing was now ragged and so irregular as to be only occasional, and spasmodic. Like some grotesque fish lying upon the dock at Billingsgate, eyes glazing. “Hope”, he gasped, and then breathed his last. Now Marley could no longer hear her, at least upon this earthly plane; Old Marley was certainly dead; dead as a door-nail.

The Third Peal

The seasons in their ordained colors passed. That grim winter turned once again into spring, and with it hope returned to all. As Maria had hoped, with the days of early greening, her Mr. Lockhart had spoken to her father and asked for her hand. As Belle observed them through the waxing of the year she had hope that she had been wrong about the young man and that he might prove less rigid and harsh in his dealings with the world; that perhaps the influence of her daughter’s tender disposition could yet redirect his course from the cold iron rails of his singular concern with gain, on to the softer paths of a broader humanity.

As High Summer came in, the young couple's banns were read out on the obligatory three Sundays, and on the fourth, they were joined as man and wife, as one domestic soul, and Maria's fate, for good or ill, was thus sealed.

Belle's heart ached the first time that Maria expressed a kind of surprise that Azariah had elected to attend to a business engagement rather than notice that her birthday, her nineteenth, had come and gone during that Fall.

They had all celebrated Yuletide yet again at the turning of the year, and though Azariah was present, he seemed with the general festivities but little connected, and with the frenetic and joyous bustle of Maria's younger brothers and sisters around the house, not at all. Indeed, he seemed to appear frankly puzzled and somewhat put out and irritated when Maria suggested that he might "play" with them.

"Piffle! They are children. They know nothing of value." Belle stood by and bit her lip and remained silent, resolved as she was not to be an interfering mother-in-law.

As the months, and then years passed, Maria, attempting to take up her role as a loyal wife, had excused and defended Azariah's apparent lack of affection.

"Oh, but he is doing ever so well in the City. He is deeply involved in establishing himself just now. With time, he will be able to lighten up his life, and ours, as the world becomes more secure, when we are finally beyond all chance of failure, as Azariah says, "Beyond the sordid reproach of poverty."

"Oh, I hope so. I *do* hope so," sighed Belle, remembering again her own situation as a girl of Maria's age, and the choices she herself had made then. "I only hope that you do not have too much fear of the world. Your hearts are yet young and nimble and can shift to meet the exigencies of fortune, whatever they may be. Keep them open and have faith, lest you bind yourselves with chains of your own making."

It was in the year of their marriage that they had established their household, ironically, it seemed to Belle, in rooms most recently occupied by Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge himself, as that worthy gentleman had, as Azariah Lockhart enviously expressed it, “moved up”, to take over the mansion of his late senior partner; the same great gray pile which had been the scene of Belle’s funereal interview with that unfortunate man, the late Mr. Marley.

The years seemed to pass quickly for Belle as her own family grew up. Little Adelaide, now a laughing child of ten showed promise of being every bit as beautiful as her older sister had been as she entered her young womanhood. The Winter household continued to be the scene of raucous activity and boisterous liveliness as the older boys reached their maturity and began to make their way out in the bustling life of the City themselves. Schemes and plans, triumphs and tragedies, successes and failures (happily many more of the former) attended the swirl of life. Ted, the oldest boy, courted and won a girl of good family who quickly became a part of the family and in short order presented him with Belle’s first grandchild, a sturdy boy child with a robust set of lungs.

Though the Winter family was not rich, and had had little ability to dower Maria or her sisters when their own marriages occurred, the young people all seemed content, in good season, to improve their worldly fortunes by patient industry. All, that is, save Maria’s stern and eager husband.

Azariah Lockhart was a rising star in the City. Over these years he had gained a reputation amongst even the hardest traders as a man not to be trifled with. It was said that he had had the perspicuity to have heavily invested “short” on the late Mr. Marley, and in effect founded his own fortune upon the posthumous assets of his onetime mentor. “Fed well upon the corpse, he did, and more power to him”, quietly nodded many gray heads in the better clubrooms on Cornhill Road. With a finger to the side of the nose, they observed tersely, “Surely best not to stand in that one’s way.” The young man himself did

not frequent the business clubs and seemed never to actually have any more conversation than absolutely necessary with anyone himself, instead usually acting through the agency of his hired clerks, engaged factors, and retained solicitors. His one connection was to be more and more involved with Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge, and there was quiet speculation in the clubs that the future might eventually see the firm of Scrooge and Marley one day become Scrooge and Lockhart.

Just as young Mr. Lockhart's business intercourse was otherwise strictly limited, so too was his social and domestic establishment. Just as he attended no business clubs, fellowships, or functions (other than the coup de gras signature of a particularly lucrative contract or foreclosure), so too he and his wife, the former Maria Winter, were rarely if ever seen at any social or artistic venue; no balls nor fetes, no dinners nor plays, no exhibitions, no weddings, christenings, nor rambles of any sort. Being quite proper, Maria "entertained", that is she was at home to visitors prompt on Tuesdays, but other than her mother, she had no friends who seemed inclined to be convivial under the pall of influence of the stern Mr. Lockhart, and he felt that when Maria visited out, often times early in their marriage seeing her girlhood companions who were now young wives and mothers themselves, she came back with "irritating" ideas and that such inspirations served no "useful purpose"

And so as the seasons passed, growing bonds of heavy propriety, of stillness, and deepening sadness, more and more bound down Maria's life. Though Belle's heart was lightened by the joys of her other children, so it was weighed down by Maria's disappointment and she felt the truth that a mother can only ever be as happy as her least happy child.

In the Lockhart home the clocks indeed ticked loudly, marking the dim evenings which usually found Maria reading quietly whilst Azariah poured over the accounts of his financial interests. Conversations, when she attempted them, were diffident affairs for Maria. One evening however, more restless than usual she attempted another sallie. Brightening her countenance she approached her husband at his desk.

“Dearest, it will be your birthday next week. Is there not some token or useful gift I might get for you, perhaps a special dish at dinner?”

“No, thank you. I cannot think of a thing I need.”

“Well, as it often happens, the point is not the need per say, but the thought.”

“You needn’t bother. For the life of me,” he averred, barely turning his head toward her, “I cannot see how such a sentiment could be beneficial.”

“Oh, can you not?”

“It would fill neither plate nor purse.”

“Perhaps it might fill the spirit, and enrich the heart. You know my birthday passed recently?”

“Yes, last month was it not?”

“Yes. My parents gave me a small daugerotype of Kew Garden. It’s most amusing. It puts me in mind of the rambles our family used to have there and makes me smile to think on it.

Indeed my mother says it was there that I first learned to walk, as a baby.”

“I wish you joy of it.” he said turning back to his ledgers. No further comment seemed forthcoming.

“Azariah, dearest.” She began again tentatively.

“Yes?”

“We’ve been married now for some time, and have been established here in Mr. Scrooge’s house, now our house, and I was wondering if perhaps we should not put more attention to, well, to decorating...” Azariah turned now toward her with more attention, “with an eye to making it our own home.”

“But it is our home. I have the deed here in this very desk. All quite regular.”

“Yes dearest, but the deed, the ownership of the building, does it seem quite...sufficient to make it our home? Do you think?”

“Of course. You needn’t worry. We own it, fully and outright.”

“Yes, but couldn’t we begin at least to make it more... comfortable, more in conformation with our own tastes, rather than those of Mr. Scrooge?”

“Maria, it’s quite sufficient. And besides, just as we got this place at cut rates upon the death of Mr. Marley, it is very probable that upon the death of Mr. Scrooge we might aspire to acquire that larger, more valuable house, also for a song, if we are sharp and swift enough about it. Therefore it behooves us little to invest in this house.”

“Perhaps just a table, a round white table I’ve seen...”

“We have tables aplenty. I do not wish to undertake further obligations at present, madame.”

“Of course Azariah, as you say.” He turned back to his books and she to hers and the clock to its accustomed business for yet another long minute’s ticking.

“Dearest?” she assayed.

“Madame?” he rejoined.

“We have no callers except my mother. I tell her you are doing every so well in the City. She says perhaps we are too frightened of the future. I mean, you are doing so terribly well and all...”

“If you are maundering on again about having children the time is not yet, we need to be established. We must show moral ...restraint.”

“Well, might we not at least have more visitors. Our friends, or my friends, or our families and their children. Ted has a new little boy, did I tell you? Just so that we might see them on occasion, perhaps play with the children?”

“Play with children? Why? Piffle, madame. They know nothing of value.”

“Then perhaps, as a suggestion, we might have a party at Christmastime. In order to advance your career. Many of the best firms have Christmas celebrations, if only to gather their clients and oblige them.” Azariah was struck for a moment as he considered this last.

“ Well, perhaps, for clients. Perhaps its not too irrational a notion.”

“Good! I’ll begin the preparations. I shall make you ever so proud of our house.”

Finally, then, at the coming of Advent, she had had the temerity to attempt a holiday gathering in their home. His family, the Lockharts, were proper and stiff. In their presence her own family was unusually subdued. The few guests sensed the dispirited tension in the house and it was a melancholy travesty of a holiday celebration. Indeed, Azariah had not deigned to be home until quite late, though it was a day which traditionally saw even the usually somber old Royal Exchange stop to throw off its dark serge and take on the bright velvets and tinsel of the holidays. He had worked quite late and had come home preoccupied with the impending fruition of yet another sharp contract.

He had stopped but briefly in the heavily draped parlour, where Maria’s oldest brother Ted Winter, now entering upon his own career in The City, attempted to engage him, proffering a bumper of punch, which Azariah ignored. Ignoring this boorishness, Ted sought to liven the party with a droll story for the gathered gentlemen.

“I have it upon good authority, “ he averred with a twinkle in his eye, “that the new electrical wire attributed to Mr. Faraday was actually invented when the Devil and Mr.

Scrooge fought one day over a copper farthing!" The company laughed for the first time that evening; all save Azariah Lockhart.

"Sir," he said coolly and with narrowed eyes, "It pains me to hear Mr. Scrooge's good name and common sense so impugned."

There was a moment of silence and then Old Mr. Farrington spoke more solemnly, "And I have it upon the authority of our solicitor that when approached today by the Parish Gentlemen's Beneficent Sodality for a small subscription to provide meat and drink and means of warmth for the poor and destitute, at this time when Want is keenly felt and Abundance rejoices, Mr. Scrooge declared that the poor should rather die and thus decrease the surplus population."

The circle was for an instant rather stunned; all save Azariah Lockhart. "The poor have no earthly right or business to be born. We reduced it to mathematical certainty long ago!" he said firmly. "A man who is born and society does not want his labor has no claim of right of the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is."

"But surely, Sir," opined young Ted, "the poor are our natural brothers and sisters. And as to the worker's use, as it has ever been, if his labor be not wanted today, it indubitably will be tomorrow."

"Piffle! At Nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone." He turned upon his heel and left the company once again standing dour and heavy-hearted.

Azariah Lockhart had found his wife closeted with her mother in one of the chill and empty rooms above stairs. As he quietly passed by, through the partially open door he could see the two, facing away from him toward the cold hearth, upon a settee, leaning upon one another, heads quite close, and he saw that as Belle held her, Maria was sobbing quietly. Out of the corner of her eye, Belle could see him, standing in the hallway with his

hand upon the knob as she tried to bring his young wife some comfort. Their eyes met and she saw that he took in the picture in a narrow glance. Then very quietly, without shifting his gaze from hers, he slowly closed the door the rest of the way. As Maria heard the faint click, she raised her face hopefully toward the sound. It took her a moment to comprehend that the sound was one of closing, not opening, and as she then met her mother's eyes, she collapsed into her arms, weeping now freely and deeply, barely able to get her breath between the wracking sobs. For a moment Belle was as frightened as she had been while listening to the struggling respiration of Jacob Marley on the night seven years before when she had held his hand as he had died in such fear and misery. As she held Maria, taking upon herself as much of her child's pain as she might, memory of that long ago interview came back to her and as she stared out into the stygian darkness beyond the window, a desperate inspiration began to form in her heart.

Once again, the next morning, Belle used the brightest hours of the day for her own clandestine purposes. This was partly due to the extreme irregularity if she should be away from her home and hearth at any marginally domestic hour, and also because what she intended was so fearsome a thing in itself that her heart quailed at the very thought, even dressed in its lightest countenance of daylight. As the City clocks struck highest noon on the next day, the very sky seemed in league with her plot and for once its vivid refulgence belied London Town's constantly palpable brown air. There was a fresh breeze running though the upper regions, and though chilling in the extreme, it had managed to rip open the great gray sack of cloud and allow here and there a sweeping shaft of pure, golden light to filter fleetingly through the flying rack, illuminating the scintillating snow to faerie brightness.

It was in the midst of such a luminous mandate from the heavens that Belle found herself standing in the quiet of the day in an otherwise deserted graveyard on the nearer

edge of the Old City. How on earth (or more to the point how in heaven's name) Jacob Marley had managed to be interred in consecrated ground, and further how that particularly burdened plot had not belched forth his remains in protest, only those heavens and perhaps the avaricious and malleable rector of the parish knew. Not only were Marley's earthly remains in fact deposited there, but entombed in a grandiose mausoleum, the size of a small coach house in itself. It had certainly been Marley's habitual, and now posthumous, intent not to have spent a farthing more than was necessary to place himself in the dustman's wagon, or more specifically, to have foisted any bill upon the parish. Where they put Old Marley's carcass had not been of the least interest to Scrooge. As his executor, Mr. Scrooge had simply found the whole elegiac question and issue so distasteful that the gross jobbing involved in the creation of this wasteful Taj was (mirabile dictu) for once simply slipped past his notice by the sexton and his fee splitting contractor; a signal and singular event indeed. Scrooge had not attended the "funeral service"; nor indeed had anyone except the sexton and one mourner, the later paid by the venal rector who perhaps sensed that one should not squeeze a turnip just *too* hard, if only to avoid bad luck. When Scrooge was actually apprized of the nature of the tomb and its cost, such was his degree of apoplectic rage that he all but needed its shelter himself upon the instant; no doubt to shove Mr. Marley to his side of the slab, two to the bed as in the cut-rate lodgings favored by commercial travelers at that period in parts of the British Isles, most especially Scotland. But by then the thing was up, and Marley in residence and Scrooge had not been able to find anyone to sub-let (indeed the faded TO LET sign soliciting another tenant to share expenses still hung crookedly on the door), so there his erstwhile partner had lain moldering for these seven years.

In the cold brightness of the day, Belle stood before the doubly awful structure and contemplated her plan. Looking about she saw no one nearby to stop her; nor, she realized,

to rescue her from whatever she might find within. She thought for an instant that she caught the faintest whiff of cadaveric aromas and even fancied admixture with brimstone, but then she noted that they were near the malodorous Thames and even on these coldest and breeziest days the Great Stench visited itself upon all alike, rich or poor, quick or dead.

She looked upon the structure, a classical tomb, indeed a small mausoleum in itself, with a solid door of wrought iron that, while not precisely standard height, would surely admit one of her small stature. Upon the lintel was graven "MARLEY", entwined with acanthus leaves, various birds, pudgy putti angels, random harps and, presumably the very trumpet upon which Gabriel would summon his charges. In this case, however, the charges of the artiste who had created this mélange of the afterlife had fallen square upon Mr. Scrooge's desk before it was quite completed, thus accounting for the fact that its flow was summarily cut off about three quarters of the way across.

In the center of the door, just below the sub-let sign, Belle was astounded to find yet another knocker. Why, she wondered, in such a place would anyone ever think to need an instrument of annunciation? But then in the instant she looked upon the knocker she saw the veritable likeness of Mr. Marley himself, though but an instant before it had been quite plain and unfigured. This, she reasoned, presaged well for her hopeful, ghostly mission. She pushed upon the door and it did not yield a scintilla. She was thus stymied, not knowing whether the portal required a key, if such a key could be got in any event, or if indeed it was not meant to open until the Day of Judgment alone should unbraid its eternal weld. Then her upbringing returned and reminded her that she was a respectable visitor, not a burglar. She reached for the ring of the knocker, noting that a seeming image of Mr. Marley now looked down his nose at her hand as she raised it and let it fall with a ponderous thud that seemed to reverberate far within.

"Stop that!" protested the knocker. The protest came in a rather thin voice, thought Belle, for one made literally of black iron.

"Mr. Marley. Do you remember me?"

"Go away!"

"I will not. I must speak to you. Do you remember our last meeting...seven years ago this very day."

"GO AWAY!" Almost as an afterthought it seemed, the apparition added, "BOOOOOOOOOHHHHHHWWW!!" Belle thought the thing rather anemic.

"You needn't be rude. But I shall not leave until we have had a talk. Do you wish to speak here, or...do you feel more comfortable...inside."

"I do not wish to talk to you. Go away, Madam. Good day. Boooooohhhhwwwww." Here the face faded and Belle was once again alone. Thinking of nothing else, she raised the knocker again and let it fall with a bang; then another and another. She was quite in high dudgeon and now that she knew Mr. Marley to be in, she simply refused to accept that he was not receiving.

"OH, ALRIGHT! ALL RIGHT. I'm coming. I'm coming. Just *do* stop that infernal racket." The door swung ponderously open, seemingly of its own accord. She stepped across the threshold and found the space inside oddly larger than its measure from outside, though not one jot more cheerfully appointed. Though a lady of sensible proclivities, Belle was rather confused regarding the precise size of Mr. Marley's new residence. When viewed from the outside it had appeared no more than a reasonably capacious city tomb, as opposed to this rather greater inner aspect, the hollows and shadows of which seemed to stretch on and on into a vague distance. She remarked upon this, and Marley merely shrugged and sighed, "Good real estate, no doubt, but a very, *very* soft market."

"I should think so," she commiserated. Well, one must take such things on faith, she thought, moving on. "Please excuse the intrusion, Mr. Marley. I trust I am not...interrupting anything?"

"Good heavens no, Madam! Interrupting? Piffle, I say, piffle! Nothing but eternity! Booooooohhh...!" he began again. But here Belle held up an admonitory finger to cut him off, hoping that she was not being too impolite, and insecure in the etiquette for such an exchange.

Following the template of her Ladies Sodality experience, she suggested, "May we not rather accept that...as read...into the minutes? It must be *quite* fatiguing." She could now see more clearly in the lambent corpse-light of the gloom and took Mr. Marley's measure. He looked quite like she remembered him from their last meeting. Indeed he actually appeared to somewhat better advantage, as he was not now actively gurgling his last physical breath. He was also dressed in a good if slightly archaic suit of business clothes. The main disabilities of his toilette were a mass of thick chains which bound him trunk and limbs and which were punctuated at intervals of their prodigious length by what appeared to be the selfsame cash boxes and thick account books that she remembered surrounding him on his last mortal night. That and the fact that the process of decay had advanced sufficiently in seven years as to render his lower jaw only marginally attached to the rest of his face. Belle found this somewhat disconcerting and offered him her fichu kerchief that he might bind it up, thus looking no worse for wear than if he had perhaps been in the throes of a severe tooth-ache.

"Now," began Belle brightly, "I have come...here...to ask your help, your advice..."

"My advice? Fear God! Walk humbly! They weren't jesting it seems. Weren't just having us on, you know."

“Well, yes, Mr. Marley. Such admonitions have not escaped those of us who perhaps more regularly attend services.”

“Well, aren’t *we* superior... ”

“I do apologize, Mr. Marley. I did not mean to appear in the least bit smug or patronizing. Any sincere Christian fears mightily for their immortal soul if nothing else.”

“Just because *your* jaw isn’t falling off...” Marley began, defensively.

“Mr. Marley...”

“Yes? What?”

“My petition. My request?”

“Oh, what is it?” the old phantom rejoined peevishly.

“You have no reason to know or to care about me in the least. But at one time, many years ago, I was engaged to be married to your partner of late, Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge.”

“You are she?”

“He spoke of me then?”

“If I may speak bluntly, Madame...?”

“From the grave I would expect nothing less.”

“It wasn’t that Scrooge ever mentioned you directly, not by name or specific reference.”

“Oh? What, then?”

“Well I’m afraid it wasn’t flattering.”

“Oh.”

“Anytime anyone mentioned their domestic situation he would invariably mention that he had once been engaged and that it was, how did he habitually phrase it, ‘An unprofitable dream, from which it happened well that he awoke’.”

“I see. Do you know if he ever said such a thing to young Mr. Azariah Lockhart?”

“Mr. Lockhart? Oh I am sure of it. He had much advice for Mr. Lockhart of one kind or another. No more closely applied student than Lockhart. Scrooge out Marley-ed Marley and Mr. Lockhart was fair on the way to out Scrooge-ing Scrooge. That young man’s chain is already quite impressive. And Madam, I am a man who knows about chains.” Here the poor spirit broke out in the most mournful sobbing, yanking futilely on the grim links which held him so eternally oppressed. “We are every man required to send our spirit out among our fellow men and if we do not attend to it during life we are condemned to do so after death to witness what it did not share and turn to happiness in life.” He shook his chains again. “We who never walked beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole forged our chains in life, link by link, yard by yard, of our own free will. The pattern would not be at all strange to Scrooge. His chain was long and heavy ere I left the world and he has worked upon it most assiduously in these seven years since. Mr. Lockhart’s chain is yet but cadet compared to Scrooge’s. But surely, if he continues to follow in his idol’s footsteps, he will have a corker of his own in the end.”

“Mr. Marley, you have been so kind as to receive me.” At this Marley simply pulled his spectral spectacles down a bit on his nose in order to be able to fix Belle with what she considered with a rather arch gaze, for a spirit. “Well, at any rate we are here and we are having this little chat. And, well, I wonder if you might be willing to help me?”

“Help you? In what way? And more importantly, why? Remember, Madam I am among the damned and the damned have nothing to lose, nay, and nothing to gain.”

“What I want, what I need, what I pray, is that Mr. Lockhart should turn aside from his current path, that path upon which Mr. Scrooge’s precepts guide him daily, in short your own tragic path. Is there the nothing that you might do? You yourself said that it is your fate to travel the world, seemingly to serve, if not as a shining example then perhaps at least as a terrible object lesson.”

“Well, as to traveling about, you find me at a signal moment. For reasons known only to Providence, it is usual for one to spend one’s first term in contemplation of one’s transgressions, in the limbo of the grave. This very evening, seven years, ends my term of hibernative solitude.”

“I have been rather regarding the passage of time, of these events,” puzzled Belle, “And for the life of me I cannot understand how all these circumstances can possibly have occurred in their right sequence, with a proper acknowledgement of time between them, if you see my meaning. It has been seven years by the calendar since you died...forgive me...” Marley merely shrugged, “and yet out in the real world, the world on the Exchange, In Mr. Scrooge’s world, we are seemingly in the self-same year. ‘Tis a weirding of which I cannot ken.”

“Ah, well” Marley explained, “Time does indeed seem different. I suppose...in the world, ‘pon ‘Change, the minutes and the months are constant like water, drip drip drip, inexorable, and always flow in the same direction. Here it is rather more like...the wind. First howling by and then of a sudden, still as kiss your hand. Blowing from hither to yon, then the other direction entirely, from yon back to hither. There is no understanding eternity. It cares little for your calendar, Julian or Gregoric, and as for your clock, not a potty fig.

“And so, Madame, in short, you wish me to scare the brazen bejezzus out of your Young Mr. Lockhart. Boooooooooohhhhhwww!”

“Actually, I had rather a different plan in mind.”

“Eh?”

“I believe that should you appear to Azariah Lockhart at this point in his life, when he is in his ascendancy, youthful, strong, and proud, there is every possibility that you might simply harden his resolve. The young are stiff-necked. I fear that you would have to

haunt him habitually before the lessons might be taken to heart. No, I have another suggestion as to your first visit to the upper airs. Mr. Lockhart has learned his lessons, it is true, but he had to first have a teacher, who led, and who still leads him, step by step to his present place."

"Scrooge!" Marley cackled, clapping his hands and actually cutting a caper as his ghostly impediments allowed.

"Just so. I think that Azariah has had not yet time to look behind him, no time for deep and secret regrets to have primed the pump of his potential for good will. He would not yet feel the need for change. And he would still have the example of a stern and implacable Ebenezer Scrooge to emulate. But...Mr. Marley, if we were perhaps to focus on Mr. Scrooge, we catch two fish with one hook, or in this case, with one chain. I hope in my heart that Ebenezer is ripe for a transformative experience. And that having been accomplished, happily, Azariah will still have no more influential teacher or constant example. And if *his* life thus be changed there is yet hope of happiness for my Maria, to whom he is married."

"You have great faith in my abilities."

"I have hopes in you. But rather, my deepest faith is in Ebenezer. I believe, as I always have, that he has had pain in the life he has chosen. I watched his nature change, his spirit alter, to a hope of gain that changed from everything that made my love for him of any worth or value. Perhaps I failed him then. It may be a gift I can give now."

"All very touching, Madame." Marley had stopped the glee he had shown at the possibility of haunting his old partner, and with a sharp glance said, "Your daughter, Mr. Lockhart, even Ebenezer, *they* all profit. But why should this warrant *my* helping him? What did he do for me in life? Was he there for me in any way except to give me a hard-termed note at the standard six and a half percent? Partners? Piffle. And would he have forgiven a

moment's late repayment. He would not! Why should I wish to see Ebenezer Scrooge redeemed? Why, when I will still wear my chains? I am sorry for your daughter's plight, but she had the ability to weigh the bargain, as you did, and to make the sounder decision to abandon the young man and cut her losses." Belle winced as this analysis cut to the very depths of her own heart. "In spite of all your breathlessness, Madame," Marley continued briskly, "Business is business. And now I have mine to go about. If there is nothing further...?"

"Oh, Mr. Marley! You are my last hope! Do not, I pray you, do not turn away! You know the extremity of my need or else I would not be in this terrible place!"

"Ah, but you are only in this place for an instant, and then back to home and hearth. I have nothing, nothing but my chains and eternity in which to contemplate them."

Belle paused only an instant. "Mr. Marley. You are a man of business and able to recognize a good bargain when you see it, no?"

"Such was my reputation, though what good it does me now..." he said with a shrewdly innocent tone.

"There is yet one bargain that we might strike."

"Go on."

"My one wish is for the help you might give. Your one hope is to be free of your chains. We have then, what those hard men on the Exchange would call a "strike price", do we not?"

"Indeed. I assume you have done due diligence regarding terms? Your offer?"

"Should you visit and turn Mr. Scrooge, and that eventuate in the redemption and true change of Mr. Lockhart...then I will undertake your burden."

"And I shall be thenceforth free and unencumbered by these bonds? For all eternity?"

“Oh, Mr. Marley. Eternity? No, I demand better terms. That after all is what bargaining is about. I do have that which you want and need, as you may have that which I desire.”

“You presume to teach me the art of business? Boooooooooowwhhhhhhhh!” Belle remained silent, her head erect, staring at him, her arms crossed. “Boooooooooowwhhh.” Marley tried again, and then sensing her implacability on the point, suddenly acquiesced, “Oh, all right! Your modified terms?”

“Not eternity, but for an age. Take it...or leave it.”

A Christmas Belle
R Cantrell
General Audience
Experimental literary mashup

Synopsis- Belle Winter has struck a deal by which Jacob Marley will haunt Scrooge to turn his character in return for which she has agreed to take on his ghostly chains.

The Fourth Peal

The exact events of that fateful Christmas Eve were not something to which Belle was then privy. But, suddenly, after that one night, Ebenezer Scrooge had become as good a friend, as good a master, as good a man as the good old City knew. Some people (including, at first, young Azariah Lockhart) scoffed to see the alteration in him, but Scrooge let them laugh, and little heeded their cynicism. Such as these would be blind anyway. But it seemed that as a part of his New Policy, Scrooge paid greater attention to those about him in business as well. His long-suffering clerk, after first fearing for Scrooge's sanity and

considering calling for a straight-waistcoat, subsequently marked a change in the fortunes of his family from that time.

Mr. Scrooge became known (quietly) for the munificence he habitually showed to public subscriptions for the relief of the various poor. He walked about the streets, and watched people hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head, and questioned beggars, and looked down into the kitchens of houses, and up to the windows, and found that everything could yield him pleasure.

And most important from Belle's vantage, he became as good a preceptor of this principle of wishing God's Blessing to Everyone as you could imagine. And the force of his conversion spread even to the old Exchange and his erstwhile competitors, colleagues, and admirers, such as Azariah Lockhart, were treated to constant and steady advice to dispel the shadows of things which might have been to the detriment of their spirits.

Azariah, who indeed became an associate in the new Scrooge and Company, needed some time to convince himself that these new precepts were indeed sound.

"A subscription? Bah!" Scrooge was heard by Young Lockhart to say to the Men's Beneficent Sodality in a shocked tone the following year on yet another Christmas Eve.

"A subscription you say? Humbug! That would be inefficient and insufficient to the purpose. An endowment. An endowment for now and forever! Will you be so kind as to come into my office, Bob? Bring paper and ink that we might begin to trace a larger plan of philanthropy."

"Sir," said Azariah, "I might point out that the sterling you are proposing to lock up in this...elymosinary escrow, might be realizing a solid five percent if placed...elsewhere. Perhaps a more prudent course would have one donate the next year's interest, or perhaps a part of it rather than..."

“ No, no, no Azariah, my dear boy! Not another year must pass,” fretted Scrooge as he looked out the now sparkling windows of the counting house “Not another day, another hour, in which we countenance fearful Ignorance and pitiless Want in our midst. We haven’t missed our chance, no indeed, we have not. Think that every moment that passes is yet another opportunity lost rather than capital lost! I have no idea how much gelt I have frozen away in these vaults. I would that we keep moving it up and out for the doing of good until I hear the ring of the last groat echo in that chamber where my heart was so long locked away. Giving makes you the richer man. Keep that as your only fixed star, my boy!”

So eventually through this agency change came to young Lockhart as well; and peace, and a happy home.

And in that home it was now Christmas Eve once again, seven more years having passed. Adelaide, now a blooming seventeen year old oversaw the rambunctious play of her younger brothers and sisters as well as her various nieces and nephews, including the three who were her sister Maria’s children. Her father had once again played Father Christmas by bringing in the toys and treats of the season. This time however, Azariah had served as the porter and had laughingly received the prodding, pummeling, and probing of the herd made of his own children and their cousins, finally collapsing in a gale of laughter upon the carpet on his back, while hoisting his youngest, little Ebenezer, still barely able to walk, high above him and shouting “Wheeeeeeee!”

“Careful, you’ll break them!” laughed Maria.

“Piffle, Madam. I say, piffle! Why they are as like to break me as I them! I say, Ted, is that bowl of Smoking Bishop quite ready?”

Belle watched all of this with a joy alloyed only by the secret knowledge that the greater this joy, the more completely Mr. Marley would eventually be sure to point out that he had upheld his end of their bargain. She had not to date heard so much as a single eerie wail, nor the clank of a single link of ghostly chain during these last seven years. She had not yet taken on the spectral burden, as evidenced by the fact that she habitually felt as light as a feather, especially on such nights as this one. But she lived in another way under the constant dread of eventually redeeming her pledge and her contract. What that would portend, whenever Marley should choose to execute its terms, she could but guess. Nevertheless, she felt the passage of seven years to be especially ominous.

The holiday festivities had been especially joyous that year, the children prospering, the grandchildren healthy and thriving. Mr. Winter remarked upon it as they prepared for bed late that night, "We are indeed blessed, Belle." She smiled and agreed, but ever her glance went to the blackness of the cold night so close outside their window. After they had snuffed the candle, she lay awake long after her husband was snoring gently beside her.

Far in the night then, Belle thought she heard the sound of voices, but coming from where she could not say. She rose and went to the window. There, through the pane she could see many ethereal figures gliding in and out of the shreds of fog, some attired much as she remembered Jacob Marley, some in more ancient costume of centuries past, and all encumbered similarly with chains and cashboxes and heavy bags of coin. She could see one richly dressed old gentleghost who wailed most piteously, with a large safe attached to his ankle. The pitiful figure held out its arms as it cried and Belle could see that the source of its agitation was a poor, thin woman down in the bleak and windy street. The woman tried to draw her small and threadbare shawl, apparently her only shelter from the deep chill, around not only herself, but also two equally thin and miserable little children, a boy and a girl, as they cowered in the dark doorway of the shuttered shop opposite. The old ghost,

who wailed at the scene most piteously, continued to float about in the air nearer the second floor and suddenly Belle understood the meaning of its cries and the fount of its pain; to see such a scene, to know that such misery existed in the world, to be aware, and now, as punishment for a lifetime of willful ignorance, to be eternally unable to affect the situation any more than the next rack of mindless fog.

While Belle ached for the suffering mother and her babes, she also began to feel terror as she understood that Jacob Marley's punishment, and thus hers by default, was much more profound than just to suffer in one's self; cold or fire or hunger or pain in herself she could comprehend and had long steeled herself to be able to suffer such torments. Ah, but now she understood that this anguish was come upon her from a much more subtle pit! To see suffering and lose one's ability to love, to act, to help; only now did it begin to dawn on her what true perdition meant, true separation of her soul from the commons of mankind. And if from everyman, then surely from those she most cared for; her gentle husband, the children sleeping around her, those now returned to their own homes nearby.

She now saw Marley himself, or rather his spirit, floating amidst the other pitiful specters; her blood ran cold. He drifted nearer and nearer, as though he seemed to be savoring the approach, or perhaps it was the style of his kind to approach in such narrowing circles, just as hideous flocks of Nubian vultures gradually spiral in to approach the helpless and the dying upon a burning African plain. She watched, fascinated, as he stopped for not an instant in coming directly through the brick and lathe of the wainscoted wall next the window. At his entry, the fire in the hearth blazed up as if in recognition, and then died altogether, leaving them once again in the sulfurous glow which attended these unquiet dead; neither moonlight, nor firelight, but a wavering, blowing, greenish shimmer, the margins of which appeared as though agitated by the hot vapor of an oven. It was clear

that if Mr. Winter had not yet been awakened by the keening commotion made by the divers spirits hovering just outside the room, or the very noticeable clanking and clinking of the same chain that Marley had sported at their first interview, that they were met on some alternate plane, sequestered from the normalities of mundane time and space.

The same face: the very same. Marley in his pigtail, usual waistcoat, tights and boots; the tassels on the latter bristling, like his pigtail, and his coat-skirts, and the hair upon his head. The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was, as she remembered, long, and wound about him like a tail. She noted more closely now its exact composition; the thick links of iron, intercalated with cash boxes and ledgers, and shot through occasionally with ponderous keys, padlocks, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.

He wore the same kerchief which she had lent him these seven years ago to bind up his decaying features and now she noted that the overall process had continued and that it appeared that he might be lacking a finger or two and perhaps his right ear had gone missing; altogether this effect did not show him to any particular advantage. Suddenly Belle wondered if she would be similarly affected when she was mistress of the great chain.

Before she could ask aloud however, Marley anticipated her, "No, the rot is not the action of the chain, but rather the simple effect of being deceased."

"Is it painful?" she asked, attempting to at least be social.

"No, indeed. If only my soul was not congealed like an evil aspic, both it and my former corporeal vehicle would be gradually and benignly returning to the great commonality. It is my hope that as you relieve me of this burden, my soul might revert to the natural order, at least as long as it takes to achieve a benign oblivion."

"What then?"

"What then? For me? I know not. But because of you, because of your bargain, I have now at least some kind of hope. Unlike these poor spirits with whom I flock."

“Your actions, sir, seven Christmases ago, whatever they encompassed, in their effect more than fulfilled your part of our bargain,” she acknowledged. “Are you not gratified by that?”

“I have continued to sit invisible beside Scrooge, and that has become a lighter part of my penance. To see that he has escaped my fate...I do see it for the beneficent fact that it is, unattached to any hope of advantage that I might have.”

“Nonetheless, I must admit myself a satisfied customer, and you a good man of business.”

“Business! Mankind was my business. I said it to Scrooge on that eventful night. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were, all, my business. I told him. 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*! I admonished him, no space of regret can make amends for one life’s opportunities misused. Yet such was I! And you Madame, working kindly in your little sphere, would, of normal course, find your mortal life too short for your vast means of usefulness.”

“Perhaps, Mr. Marley.”

“ Ah, our bargain.”

“Precisely.”

“Madame, I have performed my warrant and this is one debt which I will not, cannot, forbear to collect.”

“I understand” Belle said, simply.

“You will live and will die with this monstrous debility. How it will affect you in life I cannot say. But I suspect that, like Ebenezer, before his manumission, you will feel its

malign effects and I fear that unless you are a very remarkable person, those effects will seep out of you like the purulence that afflicted him...and me, and thus those around us.”

“And in death? Have you no comfort to give, Mr. Marley? No hope?”

“ Hope? I have learned that it comes from other regions, Madame, and is conveyed by other ministers. But, as you have given me some reason to believe in pity, I do admit to the clause of our contract which specifies that you will not bear this burden for all eternity, but only for the eons that go into the making of an age of the Earth. Though based upon my blink of but these fourteen years bearing it, I have pity for you.”

“And is it not your fate to take back the burden at the end of my term?”

“I know not. All I might do is to spend those epochal years doing anything that I might for the generic benefit of the world and its citizens all. If that wins me eventual pardon, my hopes would be fulfilled indeed. And if not, perhaps blessed oblivion will provide my spirit a bolt-hole. As to any of that, I can only...hope. Now, are you ready?”

“Yes.” Belle watched in dread as the chains that were bound about Jacob Marley began to loosen of themselves in a fluid motion, much as a reticulated python might. She closed her eyes and awaited the touch and weight of the cold iron, feeling the last time for an age the pure lightness of her unencumbered being. But she waited, and waited...and waited. Then she thought she could feel something around her neck, and venturing her hand to her breast felt something indeed. She turned to her bedroom mirror and in it saw nothing; certainly not the fathoms of dark crude iron. But looking down, apparently visible to her alone, she saw rather, a single strand of the finest, most delicate links, made of silver. At intervals along the links, whereas Marley and his disconsolate ilk had born the heavy burdens of cash boxes and ledgers, Belle found small, simple locketts of the lightest filagree, and as she opened them she saw the faces of those whom she most loved, and scenes of many acts of kindness, both given and received throughout her life.

“But this is a weight which I can gladly bear.”

“Perhaps, Madame, we both have our hope. Very little time is now permitted to me here.”

“Now is your way more clear?”

“I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere. We both have our age of incessant labor before us, for this earth must pass into eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is all developed. Fare you well, Madame.”

And with that Belle saw Old Marley, now Young Marley, New Marley, Light-as-a-Feather Marley, Marley-sans-Chains, dissolve back through her second floor bedroom wall and out into the rising dawn. Hastening to the window, she thought she might have caught just the faintest glimmer of the old spirit hastening away into the world. Waking her husband, she quickly dressed and went down to the street to see to the freezing woman and her children.

And it was from that time the worldly charity of Ebenezer Scrooge and his acolytes seemed, if it was possible, suffused with an even deeper meaning; not merely to relieve the bodily want and the ignorance of the world, but to present an even higher example; to live in the world without the chains of irrational fear. From the aether of that age there seemed to spread a spontaneous gospel of looking up and not down, of reaching out and not closing in, of realizing that even the shrewdest, and strongest amongst us do not become one jot less shrewd, nor one tittle less strong in allowing themselves to follow the path of simple kindness.

And though they never after knew their mother to wear jewelry or other adornment on her bosom, from time to time through the ensuing years, upon the occasion of a future happiness or act of kindness manifesting itself, Belle’s family heard her say quietly as to

herself, her hand straying by unconscious habit to her neckline; "Bless you old Spirit. Bless the whole wide world, right round."

The End