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A Dickens Carol

(a mostly true Christmas story)

By
NED CROWLEY

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(A DICKENS CAROL)

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A Dickens Carol was premiered by Oak Park Festival Theatre at Madison Street Theatre (Chicago) in 2017.

A Dickens Carol

(a mostly true Christmas story)

CHARACTERS

TRAIN CONDUCTOR: The stoic storyteller.

SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS YET TO COME: Ominous, silent and foreboding.

CHARLES DICKENS: The writer.

KATE DICKENS: Dickens' strong and goodhearted wife.

CARNOBY RATCHFORD: Dickens' faithful editor.

FATHER CHRISTMAS: Street corner beggar.

SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT: Jovial and larger than life.

SINGING URCHINS/CAROLING CHILDREN: Ages 5 to 10.

TRAIN PASSENGERS: Several of them.

CAROLER BOY: Beggar boy with donation tin.

MR. CHAPMAN: Dickens' publisher.

MISS HALL: Dickens' publisher.

COPPER: Cockney cop.

PRISONER: Brash female commoner.

SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS PAST: Ghostly and ethereal.

GHOST OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: Theatrical and terrifying.

SHOPPERS: Merry in spirit.

BLACKING FACTORY CHILDREN: Ages 6 to 10.

FACTORY FOREMAN: Gruff.

YOUNG CHARLEY “BOZES” DICKENS: Age 10. Quiet and kind.

LITTLE BLACKIE: Age 8. Dirty and sickly.

PRISON GUARD: Key keeper.

JOHN DICKENS: Dickens’ pompous, blowhard father.

ELIZABETH DICKENS: Dickens’ nurturing mother.

YOUNG CHARLES DICKENS: Age 18 to 20. Serious law clerk.

WILL RICHARDS: Charles’ lively friend.

LAW CLERKS: Several of them.

ALISTAIR WINTERFEZZ: Gregarious and full of life.

MRS. WINTERFEZZ: His impish wife.

GEORGE HOGARTH: Publisher of *The Chronical*.

CATHERINE HOGARTH: His daughter. Young Mrs. Dickens.

FIDDLER: Party guest and entertainment.

PARTY GUESTS/DANCERS: Several of all ages.

STREET VENDOR 1: Foul-tempered woman.

STREET VENDOR 2: Foul-tempered man.

MRS. RATCHFORD: Carnoby’s kind wife.

RATCHFORD CHILDREN:

EDWARD: Age 6 to 10. Quiet.

PETER: Age 16 to 18. Full of confidence.

LITTLE BELLE: Age 5. Blind and frail, but happy.

GEORGINA “GEORGY” HOGARTH: Kate’s sister and nanny.

DICKENS CHILDREN:

MARY: Age 13. Responsible.

WALTER: Age 10. Curious.

LITTLE KATE: Age 5. A spitfire.

SERGEANT JOE: A scoundrel.

MRS. DILBER: Low-class prison charwoman.

MRS. OLIVER: Even lower-class prison charwoman.

RESCUE WORKER: Fine, strapping fellow.

WOMAN: Kate but older and insane. Sits in a rocking chair.

ACTOR: Downtrodden Shakespearean performer.

PRIDE/VANITY: Creepy creatures.

DOUBLING/ACTOR TRACKS

- 1) Conductor/Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come/Party Guest
- 2) Charles Dickens
- 3) Kate Dickens/Catherine Hogarth/Woman in Rocking Chair
- 4) Carnoby Ratchford/Copper/Young Charles Dickens
- 5) Father Christmas/Spirit of Christmas Present/Alistar Winterfezz
- 6) *Train Passenger/Elizabeth Dickens/Fiddler/Georgy Hogarth
- 7) Train Passenger/Miss Hall/Mrs. Winterfezz/Street Vendor 1/
Mrs. Dilber/Prison Guard
- 8) Singing Urchin/Caroler Boy/Little Blackie/Law Clerk/ Edward
Ratchford/Walter Dickens/Pride
- 9) **Singing Urchin/Young Charley Dickens/Party Guest/Peter
Ratchford/Mary Dickens
- 10) Singing Urchin/Blacking Factory Child/Party Guest/Little
Belle/Little Kate/Vanity
- 11) Mr. Chapman/Factory Foreman/Will Richards (Law Clerk)/
Street Vendor 2/Rescue Worker
- 12) Prisoner/Spirit of Christmas Past/Mrs. Ratchford/Mrs. Oliver
- 13) Ghost of William Shakespeare/John Dickens/George Hogarth/
Sergeant Joe/Actor

* Track played by actor who is also musician.

** This track was originally played by a woman. If played by a man, then Mary becomes Alfred and the dance pair is adjusted as needed.

SETTING

PLACE: London. 1842.

TIME: Christmas Eve.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The many stories and specifics of Dickens' life detailed here are all true. His marriage troubles. His book troubles. His dalliances with other women. His history in the blacking factory and apprenticeship in the law firm are also true, as is the time his family spent in Marshalsea Debtors Prison.

The only narrative change is the timing of the South Eastern Railway crash. A crash that nearly killed Dickens.

That crash has been reimagined to a time just before the creation of *A Christmas Carol*. Reimagined as the very jolt that caused the inspiration for his holiday classic and changed the course of Dickens' fortunes forever.

It's 1842 Victorian London, and Dickens popularity is on the wane. His marriage and finances are in trouble and he has become embittered towards life itself. Yes, in a way, Dickens has become a bit of a Scrooge. A character he has yet to even create!

But on a cold Christmas eve, his fortunes take a dramatic turn when a train crash sends Dickens into the icy Kent river...

SCENE 4

(Lights down. A spotlight hits the CONDUCTOR as he steps forward out of the train car.)

CONDUCTOR. Dickens continued alone that ill-fated day. As self-contained and solitary as an oyster. He carried his pride as a miser might a coin box. Squeezing and clutching to it with the greed of a sinner. For, he could no more step back from his self-inflated notoriety, than he could follow Kate from the train. As his conceit had grown so large it would no more fit through the door than a wagon wheel.

(As he speaks, the other actors and PASSENGERS enter the car, flanking the CONDUCTOR. They hold packages, suitcases, a lantern and a small Christmas tree. The performers are in the dark, but the lit packages and items begin to slowly mimic the churning engines as the CONDUCTOR paints the picture of the crash.)

CONDUCTOR *(cont'd)*. Perhaps the unscheduled stop was a stroke of bad luck. Perhaps a twist of fate. Either way it was the snowflake that caused the avalanche. For at precisely 9:39 p.m., the moment when the train passed Headcorn traveling at the top speed of seventy-eight kilometers per hour, the driver saw a red flag. He whistled for the brakes and reversed the engine as is customary. But what was also customary was for any flagman to be standing at least one thousand yards out in front of any obstacle, and not the five hundred and fifty-four yard distance the flagman was currently frozen at attention. For in that vacuum of four hundred and forty-six yards was the difference between a clean stop and one brake van ...

(The packages and passengers pantomime the disaster; with the boxes slowly tumbling across the stage, the PRISONER

falling backwards clutching the lantern, and FATHER CHRISTMAS receiving the small Christmas tree to the chest.)

CONDUCTOR (*cont'd*). Two second-class cars, seven first-class carriages, and one hundred and twenty-two unsuspecting passengers crossing the Beult viaduct at the exact spot where a great length of track had temporarily been removed by South Eastern Railway's finest core of engineers. Safe, sound and London-bound, indeed ...

(Lights cut black. Metal explodes. Women scream. And the full force of the crash is brought to life in all its fury onstage. Water surges, splashes and explodes. Engines grind to a halt. Then silence. The smoke clears as a dim light slowly rises. Sparking wires and flickering bulbs slowly shed light back onstage where we reveal the shell of the broken train car tipped at an angle, windows smashed and steam and smoke sputtering from broken pipes. The carriage is empty, all save for one body: DICKENS. Crushed and lifeless under the weight of a fallen steel ceiling panel. The creaking train falls silent.

Then, after a long moment, the eerie clank of a dragging chain breaks the silence, followed by a low, ghostly moan.)

VOICE. BOHH-ZES!

(DICKENS does not move. A pause. Then another loud, dragging chain.)

VOICE (*cont'd, growing louder*). BOHHHH-ZEESSS!

(DICKENS gasps and coughs back to life.)

DICKENS (*cough*). Yes? Who's there? Help! I need help!

(He looks up. The sound of another dragging chains echoes.)

VOICE. BOHHHH-ZEESSS!

DICKENS. Yes! Quickly! Down here! The carriage is filling with water!

VOICE (*chains and the voice rattle together*). BOHHHH-ZEESSS!

DICKENS. Down here! Show yourself, I say! Show yourself!

(At that, the car rattles, steel grinds, a moaning scream echoes, and in a flashing strobe of lights and steam, a man wrapped in chains drops through the open roof hatch to the train car below with a terrifying scream.

The man is more ghoul than human. His face is terrifying, skull-like and pale. His clothes are grey and worm-eaten in the style from 1600 England—mottled tights with a rotting ruffled collar. Like a 17th-century Beetlejuice, he is wrapped in yards of steel chains clamped and locked around stack after stack of leather-bound books, and in his hand he carries a skull—he is the GHOST OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.)

DICKENS (*cont'd*). Aahhhh! What? ... What is this?! An apparition?! No, it can't be!

(The GHOST advances towards DICKENS.)

GHOST. BOHHHH-ZEESSSS!

DICKENS. How do you know my childhood nickname? What do you want of me?

GHOST (*stops before the trapped DICKENS*). Much!

DICKENS. Who are you?

GHOST. Ask me who I was.

DICKENS. All right, who *were* you then?

GHOST. In life, I was your muse ... your mentor ... your partner in words ... William Shakespeare! (*He bows dramatically.*)

DICKENS. Ha! I don't believe it.

GHOST. What evidence would you have of my reality? Why do you doubt your senses?

DICKENS (*dismissing him*). Because a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You might be a bit of undigested beef or mustard. A fragment of underdone potato. Or perhaps this large steel grate that appears to have mercilessly crushed me. Ha! There's more grate than grave about you whatever you are!

(With that, the GHOST holds the skull forward and lets out a terrifying scream.)

DICKENS (*cont'd, suddenly quivering*). Mercy! Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me?

GHOST. Do you believe in me or not?

DICKENS. I do! I must! But why have you come to me?

GHOST. It is required of every man, that the spirit within him should walk among his fellow creatures, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. Doomed to wander through the world and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared, during better days!

DICKENS. But you were famous, William. Your writings were celebrated!

GHOST. The very writings I am now chained to. Shackles I forged link by link, yard by yard, through my own arrogance and conceit! Is the pattern strange to you? Or would you know the length and weight of the coil you bear yourself? You have labored ever diligently as had I. It is a ponderous chain you carry!

DICKENS. Please William, speak comfort to me!

GHOST. I have none to give and little time to give it. I cannot rest. I cannot linger. In life, my spirit never strayed far beyond the walls of my own vanity! My verbal creations taking on greater stature than my fellow earthly ones. And now ... no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunity misused! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!

(SHAKESPEARE ends in an overly dramatic flourish of a pose.)

DICKENS. That's quite a soliloquy.

GHOST *(dropping the pose)*. I can't help it. It's what I do.

DICKENS. But you were a man of literature, William. Words were your business!

GHOST. Humankind was my business! The common welfare was my business! Charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business! But I walked through crowds of fellow beings with my eyes turned down. Towards my writings. Towards my stature and standing. With nothing but disdain for the creatures around me. Hear me Bozes for my time here is nearly done!

DICKENS. I will, William. Please don't be hard on me!

GHOST. I am here to warn you that this very Christmas Eve you have yet a chance of escaping my fate. A chance I have procured for you! *(He bows theatrically.)*

DICKENS. You were always a good muse, William, thank ye!

GHOST. Tonight, you will be visited by three spirits!

DICKENS. Uh ... is that the chance you mention?

GHOST. It is.

DICKENS. Oh. Well then. I think I'd rather not.

GHOST. Without their visits, you cannot hope to shun the path I tread. *(He slowly shakes the skull "no.")* Expect the first tonight when the train carriage drops once.

DICKENS. Can't they all come at once and have it all over with?

GHOST (*ignoring*). Expect the second when the carriage drops twice. And the third at the final stroke when the carriage drops its last. Look to see me no more. And take care that you remember what has passed between us. (*Suddenly frightened.*) But I must go! They come for me now! They come!

DICKENS. Who, William?! The demons?

(A trap door opens bellowing smoke.)

GHOST. Worse! The critics! Take heed, Bozes! Take heed!

(Hands emerge from the smoke, grab the chains, and the GHOST is dragged on his belly across the floor, backwards and screaming, into wanting hands that grasp and clutch at his chains and books. The trap door slams shut, leaving DICKENS in deafening silence.

DICKENS looks around afraid. Confused. Then, nervously.)

DICKENS. Bah! Poppycock!

SCENE 5

(DICKENS turns to the fallen steel on top of him. He struggles and finally manages to lift it and slowly pulls himself free. He scoots backwards, drops the steel and smiles with relief. Suddenly, a groan of metal erupts. The carriage shakes and violently drops. A clock bongs.

DICKENS lets out a shriek, startled by the drop. The car settles. He looks around frightened. Then shrugs it off.)

DICKENS. Poppycock!

(The train door suddenly opens, revealing a woman brightly lit and dressed all in white. Smoke and steam surround her. Holding a brightly lit train “warning lantern,” she looks radiant. The only bright spot in the dismal train car. DICKENS trembles as she steps through the opening onto the slanted train car floor. We suddenly realize her white garb is actually a bright clean version of the prison outfit we saw earlier. And although ghostly pale with a peaceful stare, she looks like the female prisoner we met earlier. Now, the SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS PAST.)

DICKENS (*cont’d*). Are you the spirit whose coming I was foretold?

PAST (*with an eerie distant voice*). I am.

DICKENS. Who, and what, are you?

PAST. I am the Spirit of Christmas Past.

DICKENS. Long past?

PAST. No. Your past.

DICKENS. Well, thank you very much, but I’ve put my past in the past as it were.

PAST. And I am here to shine a light upon it.

DICKENS. Yes, I can see that. Perhaps you could turn that down a bit. The lantern you carry.

PAST. Would you so soon put out the light I give? Yours are the dark passions that would extinguish the light of truth.

DICKENS. I’m sorry. I did not mean to offend. Tell me. What brings you here?

PAST. Your welfare of course.

DICKENS. I can’t think of anything more conducive to my welfare than some dry clothes. I am soaked to the bone.

PAST. I believe there sits a nightshirt in your overnight bag.

DICKENS. A nightshirt?

PAST. Yes, the past can be a cold and damp place. I suggest you put it on.

(DICKENS pulls his nightshirt from his satchel and begins to unbutton. He then realizes he is undressing in front of PAST.)

DICKENS. Do you mind?!

(PAST feigns embarrassment and shields her eyes. DICKENS puts on the gown and cap.)

DICKENS *(cont'd, mumbling in frustration while dressing)*.

First my wife leaves me, then my editor lectures me on the merits of my writing, next my publishers threaten to drop me, and now, after plunging into the depths of the Kent, I am evidently hallucinating about the spirit world! Clearly, I have been clubbed upon the head and have lost my sanity.

PAST. Your sanity is intact. It is your soul that is of concern. Come. Walk with me!

SCENE 6

(PAST motions to DICKENS, and together they step off the train. The set transforms into a winter London street. There is a merry bustle as SHOPPERS greet each other, one carrying gifts, the other a wreath on his arm. They call to each other in passing.)

SHOPPER 1. Merry Christmas, sir!

SHOPPER 2. And a happy new year to you!

(DICKENS and PAST pass unnoticed.)

DICKENS. Good heavens! I was bred in this place!

PAST. Your memory is strong. Does the path ring familiar?

DICKENS. I was a boy here!

PAST. Yet ... your lip appears to tremble. And what is that upon your cheek?

DICKENS. What? 'Tis nothing. Lead me where you would, Spirit.

PAST. Do you remember the way?

DICKENS. Remember it? I could walk it blindfolded!

PAST. Strange that you've forgotten it for so many years.

DICKENS. There are some things not meant to occupy the mind.

(BLACKING FACTORY CHILDREN, a small group of boys, run past while laughing. They huddle in the street making snowballs. DICKENS looks on in wonder.)

DICKENS *(cont'd)*. Why, that's Robert Masterson! And Little Blackie! Hello!

(A snowball is hurled his way. He ducks. It misses.)

DICKENS *(cont'd)*. Now see here!

PAST. These are mere shadows of things that have been. They are not aware of us.

(A dirt-covered FACTORY FOREMAN steps into the street and scolds them.)

FOREMAN. Back to work you scallawags! And you! *(To BLACKIE.)* Keep your grimy hands off the windows or no Christmas break for you!

(The CHILDREN run from the foreman taunting him with song.)

CHILDREN.

OH, BRING US YOUR FIGGY PUDDING

OH, BRING US YOUR FIGGY PUDDING!

(They laugh.)

DICKENS *(looking around in wonder)*. Warren's boot-blackening factory. I've not thought about this place in ages. I slaved fourteen hours a day here back when ... when ...

(Lights come up on a small section where a YOUNG CHARLEY "BOZES" DICKENS sits at a worktable applying labels on jars of boot-blackening polish.)

PAST. It appears the factory is not yet deserted. A solitary child neglected by his family.

DICKENS. 'Twas not their fault. What choice did they have?

PAST. They could have kept him by their side. Instead they sent him to slave away and correct for their misfortune.

DICKENS. *His* misfortune. Mother had nothing to do with it!

PAST. You appear angry.

DICKENS. Nothing of the sort. A thing of the past. I just wish ...

PAST. Yes? You wish what?

DICKENS *(gazing at CHARLEY)*. There was a child on the train tonight. I wish I had been kinder is all.

BLACKIE. Hey Bozes! Where are you? It's quitting time!

(LITTLE BLACKIE runs into the shop and removes his muffler. He holds a polish-covered present in his polish-covered black hands.)

CHARLEY. Just one more label. I've almost beaten my record.

BLACKIE. Oh, bugger your record! It's Christmas Eve.
Here, I got you something!

CHARLEY. What'd you go and do that for? I've got nothing
for you!

BLACKIE. Go on.

DICKENS. Oh, dear Little Blackie. He was always covered
in boot-polish, you know! 'Tis why we called him that!

*(CHARLEY unwraps it. It is a crude wooden carving
covered in black spots. He holds it up.)*

CHARLEY. Um. Thanks. What is it?

BLACKIE. It's baby Jesus! I carved 'im myself. I know it
looks like baby Jesus has black polka-dots on 'im. But
that's just cuz I got a little boot polish on 'im is all.

CHARLEY. Thank you, Blackie.

BLACKIE. And next year, I'll carve you a Mary or Joseph.
Or maybe a donkey. A donkey's more fun than Joseph.
Joseph doesn't do much. Maybe you can give 'im to your
mum for Christmas.

CHARLEY. I will, Blackie, thank you.

BLACKIE. See you Monday, Charley! Merry Christmas!

*(BLACKIE runs off, pausing C by DICKENS and PAST to
cough. He freezes.)*

PAST. Such a frail creature, Little Blackie. But he had a full
heart.

DICKENS. Yes, and full lungs too. Full of poison. He did not
see another Christmas.

PAST. A boy with nothing and yet you envied him.

DICKENS. He had a family.

PAST. You had a family. Or have you forgotten.

SCENE 7

(Lights up on the other side of the stage where JOHN DICKENS and ELIZABETH DICKENS sit in what appears to be a prison cell.)

DICKENS. Marshalsea Debtors Prison. Why have you brought me here?

PAST. Why, to be with your family.

(A rattle of keys, and a PRISON GUARD opens the bars letting young CHARLEY into the cell area. There he greets his mother and blowhard father.)

ELIZABETH. Look, it's Charlie!

JOHN. There he is! *(He blows a naval whistle, pockets it and salutes.)* Officer on deck!

CHARLEY. Hello, Father. Mother.

ELIZABETH. Merry Christmas, Charley. Come let's have a look at you.

(She takes CHARLEY aside and scrubs the black from his hands.)

JOHN. Well, let's have it then. How'd we do this week?

DICKENS. Don't give him a thing. Even from debtors prison he'll find a way to squander it. A complete opportunist with no money sense, my father was.

(CHARLEY transfers coins from his pockets to his father.)

PAST. Shipped you off to the blacking factory. To pay off his debts.

DICKENS. What kind of parent would do such a thing?

PAST. And yet you desired to be with him. Why?

DICKENS. He was my father. I suppose every boy wants to be with his father no matter how notorious.

JOHN (*finds the carving*). And what's this?

CHARLEY. It's baby Jesus.

JOHN (*inspecting it*). A spotted baby Jesus. Looks more like a baby cheetah!

CHARLEY. It's for you, Mother. A friend gave it to me.

JOHN. Perhaps I can trade it to the guards. They like animals.

CHARLEY (*to his mother*). I thought it would brighten your Christmas!

JOHN. No need to brighten, Bozes. Things are looking up! Big plans on the horizon. Did you hear the Royal Navy wants me back? That's the word on the street.

DICKENS. My father lived in a fantasy world. Do you know he would write my friends throughout the years begging them for money! The scoundrel!

PAST. And yet here you are. Wanting in.

DICKENS. Bah! Better to be free than be locked up with such bloated pride.

PAST. That expression rings familiar, does it not?

DICKENS. Enough with your insinuations, Spirit! Is there not a more jovial memory you can share?

PAST. As you wish. It is time to see another Christmas.

SCENE 8

(The prison darkens, and the main stage lights up the law office of Winterfezz and Marley. A YOUNG CHARLES DICKENS, with a goatee, sits at a desk with a quill in hand doing paperwork. WILL RICHARDS is by his side and a handful of CLERKS coming in and out of the room.)

PAST. Do you know this place?