



# A Christmas Carol: Glossary, Commentary and Notes

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# 1 Introduction

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little glossary, to rise the Ghost of understanding of Mr. Dickens' Ideas, such that my listeners are not put out of humour with the text, with the season, or with myself.

Hopefully, with this humble companion to the reading, you may understand why Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, why the fiddler struck up Sir Roger de Coverley, and why the young boy called Scrooge Walker when asked to go buy the prize turkey.

Much of the content comes from *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* and from the O.E.D. Other things come from the context of other period literature, from the Dickens Society mailing lists, and from reading various commentaries over the years. Much of the simple term definitions came from a variety of online resources.

And, finally, I obtained a huge amount of information from "The Annotated Christmas Carol" by Michael Patrick Hearn, which is a truly delightful book, the sole failing of which is that it has no index.

The year is 1843, and Charles Dickens is struggling on as a serial author for a newspaper. This book is to be his most popular, and will catapult him to international fame, as well as to enormous financial success. It is this book, more than any other, for which Dickens is remembered. And many credit this book with the revival of the celebration of the Christmas holiday in much of the English-speaking world.

In 1678, Josiah King wrote in "The Examination and Tryal of Old Father Christmas" that Father Christmas "of the Town of Superstition, in the Country of Idolatry," now stood accused of having "from time to time, abused the people of this Common-wealth, drawing and inticing them to Drunkenness, Gluttony, and unlawful Gambling, Wantonness, Uncleaness, Lasciviousness, Cursing, Swearing, abuse of the Creatures, some to one Vice, and some to an other; all to Idleness." So we see that Scrooge denouncing Christmas as a merely "A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket ever twenty-fifth of December."

And even Mr. Dickens was criticized for this work by many puritans, because he painted Christmas as a time for merrymaking, and because he mentioned The Demon Liquor just a few too many times in the story. And many devout persons criticized his blasphemy and flippant references to God, sprinkled throughout the text. With a modern ear, we are hard pressed to hear a single one.

In a letter to one offended lady (March 25, 1847) Dickens assures her that if he were at Fecciwig's ball, "I should have taken a little Negus, and possibly not a little beer." He goes on to remind her "of a certain Marriage in Galilee, and of a certain supper where a cup was filled with Wind and not with water."

## 2 Stave One : Marley’s Ghost

Stave One, in which we meet Ebenezer Scrooge and Bob Cratchit, and in which the ghost of Jacob Marley appears to Scrooge to tell him that he may still redeem his life, and avoid an eternity of torment.

### 2.1 Terms

#### 2.1.1 Stave

Archaic form of “staff”, a stanza of a poem or song. This is an extension of the the title of the book, “A Christmas Carol in Prose.” This pun continues in his other Christmas books, with *The Chimes* being divided into “quarters,” and *The Cricket on the Hearth* being divided into “chirps.”

#### 2.1.2 Scrooge



Scrooge is a money lender whose office is likely located fairly close to the ’Change. And he is the most famous miser in literature. Indeed, his name became, almost immediately after the publishing of this book, a universal synonym for miser, and remains so to this day.

See 7.1 for more discussion of Scrooge’s name.

Scrooge has been played in film by many well-known actors, including Patrick Stewart, Rich Little, Michael Caine, Scrooge McDuck, Reginald Owen, Alastair Sim, George C. Scott, and many others.

Scrooge is the central character of our story, and so you should get to know him well. He is deep, and has had a hard life. This is primarily as a result of his own decisions, but also has a lot to do with the treatment he received from his father.

Dickens himself appears many times in this story. Much of him comes through in the character of Scrooge, although perhaps more of him appears in Fred.

#### 2.1.3 Good upon ’Change

The ’Change, or the Exchange, was (and is) the equivalent of Wall Street. Financial business in London is conducted on The Strand, and has been for several hundred years. The original buildings of the Royal Exchange burnt down in 1839, and A Christmas Carol was written in 1843, so the new Exchange would have been completed very recently.

A ’change is also, colloquially, a money changer’s office, which is probably why Scrooge is typically pictured as a money lender, in addition to the scene in Stave Four when the young couple is unexpectedly released from their mortgage by Scrooge’s death.

For a man’s name to be good upon ’Change meant that his word was as good as a contract, or as good as a banknote. In other words, if he said it, it was true.



#### 2.1.4 Door-nail

William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (1362) might be the origin of the phrase “ded as a dore-nayle.” Or it might date earlier than that, to an ancient British ballad “St. George for England.”

But George he did the dragon kill,  
As dead as any door-nail.

And, of course, Shakespeare used the phrase in *Henry IV* part II, and in *Henry VI* part II.

You will also notice, if you read any abridged version of the book, that this part is left out. When Dickens did public readings of this book, he read from his own abridged edition. There are many different versions of this, and one of them is typically used in modern abridged printings, although a handful of publishers have made their own abridgements in recent years.



#### 2.1.5 The wisdom of our ancestors

A sarcastic reference to Edmund Burke’s speech in March of 1775, in which he appealed to the wisdom of our ancestors as being the primary reason that the American Colonies should remain part of the Empire.

In his home at Gad Hill, Dickens had an extensive library of fake books, which was a particular joke of his. One series of these books were titled “The Wisdom of Our Ancestors,” with individual volumes titled “Ignorance,” “Superstition,” “The Block,” “The Stake,” “The Rack,” “Dirt,” and “Disease.”

#### 2.1.6 Assign

The one to whom property will pass upon death.

#### 2.1.7 Residuary legatee

One to whom the remainder of the estate passes after payment of debts.

#### 2.1.8 His son’s weak mind

In manuscript, later struck, appears the extended version:

... although perhaps you think that Hamlet’s intellexts were strong, I doubt it. If you could have such a son tomorrow, depend upon it, you would find him a poser. He would be a most impracticable fellow to deal with; and how ever creditable he might be to the family after his decease, he would prove a special encumbrance in his lifetime, trust me.

### **2.1.9 Nuts to**

“Nuts to *someone*” - A source of pleasure or delight to one. Also sometimes “good luck.”

### **2.1.10 Dog days**

From July 3 to August 11, when Sirius, the Dog Star, rises and sets with the sun. The hottest days of the year.

### **2.1.11 Come Down**

An expression meaning “to lay down money.” Thus, “come down handsomely” means to be generous with one’s money.

... they often came down handsomely, and Scrooge never did

Apparently Dickens was concerned that audiences in the United States would not get this joke, but his fears were allayed when, at his first public reading in Buffalo (March 13, 1868) “the applause broke forth from all parts of the house.” (*Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*)

### **2.1.12 God save you!**

Up until 1968, every word spoken on a stage in London had to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain’s examiner of plays, who determined if it was appropriate. “God save you” was not appropriate, due to possibly being blasphemous. Thus, the phrase “Heaven save you!” was substituted in theatrical renderings. The same was true of the final line, “God bless us every one.”

### **2.1.13 Humbug**

Colloquially, a hoax, imposition, fraud, or sham; used interjectionally to mean “stuff and nonsense”; in slang, to deceive or cheat.

### **2.1.14 A stake of holly through his heart**

Up to 1623, it was custom for a murderer or a suicide to be buried with a stake through his heart.

### **2.1.15 Fellow-passengers**

In his public reading version of this work, after 1867, this phrase is changed to “Fellow-travellers,” a phrase which features also in *Little Dorrit*.

### **2.1.16 Situation**

Post, job, or employment. Also in stave four.

### 2.1.17 Fifteen shillings

Fifteen shillings a week actually wasn't such a bad wage, although it would make things a little tight for a man with six children. Before Dickens started to make money at writing, he was making fifteen shillings a week. A laborer would generally make eight shillings a week.

Cratchit is, in fact, painted in much more dire straits by modern interpretations of the story (television and movies) than is really warranted by his income.

### 2.1.18 Bedlam

The Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, founded as a priory in 1247; by 1402, it was a hospital or asylum for lunatics; by extension, any madhouse; hence, any scene of mad confusion.



Asylums were often no more than prisons, where the inmates were subjected to all sorts of horrible tortures which were called “treatments.”

It also seems that many wealthy people would have inconvenient persons - a spouse, servant, or enemy - declared insane and committed to asylums, where they would be kept in a drugged state, or where their accusations would simply be called ravings.

### 2.1.19 Are there no prisons?

In *Chartism*, by Thomas Carlyle (1840) we read these sarcastic words:

Do we not pass what Acts of Parliament are needful; as many as thirty nine for the shooting of partridges alone? Are there not treadmills, gibbets; even hospitals, poor-rates, New-Poor Laws? So answers Aristocracy, astonishment in every feature.

### **2.1.20 Union workhouses, the Treadmill, and the Poor Law**

Scrooge suggests that the poor go to the Union workhouses, or to the Treadmill, or that they be taken care of by the Poor Law. I'll try to summarize what he's talking about, but it's long and complicated, so I'm leaving out some of the details.

These things can be thought of as the welfare system of the time, although that's somewhat oversimplifying.

The Union Workhouses were workhouses run by the local parish. When you were sent to the workhouse, this was referred to as "going on the parish." People were sent there if they were poor, or in debt, or otherwise destitute. There they would work for their daily food and lodging. Exactly what they did in these workhouses varied from one place to another, but it was always backbreaking menial work.

People that had gone on the parish were considered to be the lowest, and even poor people held them in contempt, knowing that they, too, were a week's wages away from going to the workhouse themselves. A child that grew up in the workhouse, like Oliver Twist, would often get the disparaging nickname of "Work'us" or "Parish."

The Treadmill, on the other hand, was more of a means of punishment. A criminal would be forced to walk on the treadmill, which consisted of a mechanical device like a moving staircase. Failure to keep up with the moving stairs could result in serious injury. Nasty things. Ironic that now people voluntarily use treadmills.

The Poor Law was something far more convoluted. It was ostensibly to help the poor, but was more effective in making poverty essentially inescapable.

Dickens was a very outspoken opponent of the Poor Law, and both this book and Oliver Twist were an embarrassment to the ruling government.

### **2.1.21 Surplus population**

Mr. Filer, a student of Malthus appearing in Dickens' book "The Chimes" puts it this way:

"The poor have no earthly right or business to be born. And that we know they haven't. We reduced it to a mathematical certainty long ago!"

### **2.1.22 The palpable brown air**

In the 1840s, everybody burned coal to heat their homes and businesses, and to cook. Coal smoke turns the air brown, and puts a fine layer of black dust on everything. By the time electricity was starting to replace coal, London was the dirtiest city in the world.

### **2.1.23 Water-plug**

Fireplug, or hydrant.

### 2.1.24 Saint Dunstan



Apparently folks at the time would have been familiar with the story of Saint Dunstan. Dunstan was, among other things, Archbishop of Canturbury in 960. There are a number of interesting legends around him, but one of them says that he was approached by the devil in the disguise of a beautiful woman, and he grabbed her nose with metal-worker's tongs.

Thus, the reference to Saint Dunstan nipping the Evil Spirit's nose with the cold weather is about this legend.

May 19th is Saint Dunstan's day. He is the patron saint of goldsmiths.

### 2.1.25 Half a crown

Two shillings and sixpence, this was one sixth of Bob's weekly salary, since he would have worked six days a week.

### 2.1.26 A bad lobster in a dark cellar

Rotting crayfish, it turns out, emit a phosphorescent glow. This is a reference to Marley's decaying face.

### 2.1.27 ... through a bad young Act of Parliament

Acts of Parliament were frequently so loosely worded that any determined lawyer would be sure to find a loop hole through which they could get their client to avoid prosecution.

### **2.1.28 Splinter-bar**

The crossbar in front of a carriage which supports the springs.

### **2.1.29 Dip**

A candle made by dipping a wick in melted tallow. Cheaper than a wax candle, which is moulded.

### **2.1.30 Bowels**

*Marley had no bowels ...*

The bowels were, to the Victorian, the seat of human emotion. So this is another pun made by Scrooge in an attempt to regain mastery of the situation.

### **2.1.31 Shade**

*for a shade* means “for a ghost,” while *to a shade* means “to a degree.” Scrooge wisely decides not to make a joke.

### **2.1.32 The bandage around its head**

The dead were usually bound around the chin with a bandage to keep their mouth closed and prevent ghastly expressions. This also features in a number of the movie renditions of this scene, with Marley removing the bandage and his jaw falling horribly to his breast.

### **2.1.33 From other regions**

It comes from other regions, and is conveyed by other ministers

As a damned soul, Marley cannot speak the name of Christ, nor can he speak of Heaven. This is consistent with the spirit of Virgil in the fourth canto of Dante’s *Inferno*.

There are many other parallels between Dante’s work and this one. Marley plays Virgil to Scrooge’s Dante. And, as Scrooge would have been sent to the fourth circle of Hell, where he would be forced to roll great weights, Marley assures him that he will drag great chains for all eternity.

Early reviewers made much of these parallels, and there are many others that they noted, but which I will omit. See *The Annotated Christmas Carol* for more details.

## **2.2 Notes**

Unfortunately, it is the Scrooge of Stave One that remains imprinted on the minds of most people not more familiar with the book. The term “Scrooge” has become synonymous with miser, and everyone knows that Ebenezer Scrooge says “Bah! Humbug!” – even those that could not tell you what Humbug means.

I have an idea that, ironically, it is Dickens who is responsible for this work being remembered as dark and depressing, rather than filled with joy and humor, as it really is.

In the 1860's, particularly after the American Civil War, Dickens toured Europe and the United States, giving public readings of his works. But he was a perfectionist, who felt that he had to read the entire story, rather than just excerpts. So he read a greatly abridged version of A Christmas Carol - his most popular work - when he did these readings. In doing so, he stripped out most of the light-hearted stuff, leaving just the bare bones of the story, which is pretty gloomy stuff. Cratchit becomes merely a poor and rather dim-witted clerk, rather than a source of comic relief. Fred becomes the owner of a single rather self-conscious speech, rather than the selflessly loving nephew. And Fran, God bless her, vanishes entirely. And so, the story that was imprinted on our culture's collective memory is a dark and depressing one, redemptive only at the last minute in an almost afterthought sort of way.

At least, that's my take on it.

Fred is Scrooge's nephew - the son of his beloved sister Fran, who we will meet in Stave Two.

## 3 Stave Two : The First Of The Three Spirits

### 3.1 Terms

#### 3.1.1 United States' Security

This one is a little complex. Put simply, it's a jab at the financial crisis in the USA during the 1840's, also called the Hungry Forties. During this deep depression, debts were often settled at fifty cents on the dollar, just so that something could be realized on a debt. A United States' Security, then, was his way of referring to a debt that would never be paid, or one that would be paid at a fraction of its value.

#### 3.1.2 Gigs and carts

To a resident of Victorian England, the distinction between a gig, a cart, a carriage, and a dray would have been as familiar as the difference between a SUV, a minivan, and a station wagon are to you. And, much as they are now, different varieties of transportation were indications of social standing.

Here are the main categories of transportation.

A waggon is a large heavy vehicle used primarily for carrying goods. Draw by perhaps as many as 10 horses, and travelling at about 4 or 5 miles per hour. A van is smaller and somewhat faster. Waggons and vans are usually open vehicles.

A coach is an enclosed four-wheel vehicle. In the late 1700s, a coach might even have springs, which made the ride more pleasant. The mail coach carried the mail, while a stage coach would carry passengers. A stage was a portion of the journey. At each stage, the coach would change horses.

A carriage is a more noble vehicle. You had arrived in the social elite when you could afford your own carriage. There were various different styles of carriage, including barouches, landaus, victorias, curricles, and broughams, depending on body style, the number of horses, how many passengers they carried, and the number of wheels.





A gig is a two-wheeled carriage, drawn by one horse, and carrying one or two persons. A stanhope and a tilbury are two styles of gigs. A curricle, on the other hand, is like a gig, but for two horses. Only the rich would have a curricle, as the horses were supposed to be perfectly matched, making it an expensive proposition to equip a curricle properly. Think of it as a rich young man's sports car. When Dickens started making money at writing, the first thing he bought was a curricle.

A cabriolet, or cab, were an innovation of the 1820s. A cab was often a carriage retired from service to a nobleman, and one could be hired for short trips in the city. They were hackneyed, meaning that they were kept for hire, and so the term 'hack' was often used as well. While it was acceptable for a commoner to travel by hack, someone of social standing was expected to have their own carriage.

Also appearing in the 1830s were hansom cabs, which were two-wheeled enclosed vehicles with the driver sitting on an elevated seat behind the main carriage, so that the passengers had an unobstructed view while riding.

### **3.1.3 Plain deal forms**

Long, unpainted and unvarnished school benches made of deal wood, or pine.

### **3.1.4 Valentine and Orson**

Twin brothers and heroes of an ancient romance. They were born in a forest, Orson was suckled and reared by a bear, while Valentine was brought up in a king's palace. Orson was eventually reclaimed from a life of savagery by his polished brother.

### 3.1.5 What's his name?

And what's his name, who was put down in his drawers, asleep, at the Gate of Damascus; don't you see him! And the Sultan's Groom turned upside-down by the Genii; there he is upon his head! Serve him right. I'm glad of it. What business had he to be married to the Princess!

In the Arabian Nights story *Nur-ed-Din and his Son and Shems-ed-Din and his Daughter*, the daughter is forced to marry an ugly hunchback, the Sultan's Groom. But through the magic of the Genii, Nur-ed-Din's son replaces the Groom at the wedding, and the Groom is held upside-down all night. The son is then carried away by the Genii, but left in his night clothes at the gates to Damascus.

### 3.1.6 Postboy

The postilion, the driver of the vehicle.

### 3.1.7 Garden-sweep

The curve if the driveway through the grounds.

### 3.1.8 Welch wig

A welch (or welsh) wig was a woolen or worsted cap, originally made in Montgomery, Wales.



### 3.1.9 ... hour of seven

Working 8 hours a day was a bit of an innovation of the industrial revolution. In the 1840s people were still working 10 or 12 hour days. So getting off of work at 7 was very reasonable, and Fezziwig was apparently being rather generous letting them off that early.

### **3.1.10 Organ of benevolence**

The Organ of Benevolence refers to the upper part of the frontal bone of the skull. It is a term from phrenology, a science that was fairly new at the time this book was written. Phrenology is the study of the bumps on one's head, and how they define that person's character. A prominent bulge on the front of one's head indicates a great deal of benevolence, and that person should be expected to exhibit benevolent behavior. Fezziwig can therefore be presumed to exhibit such a pronounced bulge on his forehead.

### **3.1.11 Porter**

Porter, or "porter's beer," is a heavy dark brown beer made from browned or charred malt. Not to be confused with "port" or "porto," the fortified wine of Portugal.

### **3.1.12 Forfeits**

Any of the many games in which a penalty is paid by a player who misses or loses his or her turn. While this was sometimes payment in coin, most commonly it was payment by a kiss.

### **3.1.13 Negus**

From the name of the inventor, Colonel Francis Negus (died 1732). A mixture of wine (esp. port or sherry) and hot water, sweetened with sugar and flavoured.

### **3.1.14 Sir Roger de Coverley**

Almost invariably the last dance of the evening, and always taking the same form without variations: "Advance and retire, hold hands with your partner; bow and curtsy; corkscrew; thread-the needle, and back to your place."

American square dancers know this as the Virginia Reel.

The description of the dance in this chapter is delightful, and makes a lot more sense, if you understand how the dance is supposed to work.

Bottom man and top lady retire and advance, bottom lady and top man do the same. The couples then repeat the steps, linking arms, and then the top man and top lady weave their way in and out down their sex's line, (corkscrew) join hands at the bottom, and promenade back up (thread the needle). The next couple repeats the figures until all the couples have gone through the same sequence. It is a very social dance, as contrasted with the more intimate, and so more socially isolating, waltz, which came into popularity later in the century.

As the century wears on, then, the Roger de Coverley would appear primarily in lower society, and in groups where everyone knew one another, while waltzes would gain prominence in the growing social upper classes where partners were just as likely not to know one another.

Novels from earlier in Victorian times feature this dance, which novels from later in Victorian times has the characters Waltzing. Except Dickens, who persists in writing about the lower classes, while his contemporaries prefer to ignore these unfortunates.

### 3.1.15 Cut

Dancing term. To spring from the ground, and, while in the air, to twiddle the feet one in front of the other alternately with great rapidity.

### 3.1.16 Beds ... under a counter

An apprentice would usually live at the place of his apprenticeship, with his mattress under the counter at which he worked.

### 3.1.17 Dowerless

Not a dowery in the sense of a bride price, but a wife's property became the property of the husband upon marriage. A man would often marry a rich woman in order to maintain the level of living they wished to have. Thus marriage was often little more than a financial transaction.

To marry a dowerless girl would indicate that one was actually marrying for love.

### 3.1.18 the celebrated herd in the poem

William Wordsworth, *Written in March* (1802)

The cattle are grazing,  
Their heads never raising;  
There are forty feeding like one!

All school children in 1843 would have known many of Wordsworth's poems. Many English school children even today know a great many of Wordsworth's poems.

## 3.2 Notes

I think that the closing scene of this stave is enormously symbolic. But, rather than force my interpretation upon you, I'll try to point out just a few of the points that suggest these things to me, so that you don't miss them.

First, note that Scrooge is very resistant to this ghost. His past is not something that he wants to consider, although we can clearly see that much of it was very joyful. But from the first, he wants the spirit to put on his extinguisher cap.

In the closing scene, Scrooge wrestles with the angel ... um ... I mean, he struggles with the Spirit, to get him to put on his cap and extinguish the light of the past. The face of the spirit is composed of the faces of all the important people that we have met in Scrooge's past. Scrooge is entirely a creation of his own decisions, and he can't bear to look upon that face.

When he successfully covers this spirit, with the extinguisher cap, he still "could not hide the light, which streamed from under it." This you will recognize if you have ever attempted to blot out your own past.

## **4 Stave Three : The Second Of The Three Spirits**

### **4.1 Terms**

#### **4.1.1 Free-and-easy**

A gathering place for smoking, drinking, singing and gambling. A precursor to the term “speak-easy,” probably.

#### **4.1.2 Plume themselves**

Pride themselves.

#### **4.1.3 Acquainted with a move or two**

Worldly

#### **4.1.4 Equal to the time-of-day**

Ready for whatever may happen.

#### **4.1.5 Pitch and toss**

A game of combined skill and chance. Each player pitches a coin at a mark; the one whose coin lies nearest to the mark then tosses all the coins and keeps those that turn up heads the one whose coin lay next in order does the same with the remaining ones, and so on till all the coins are disposed of.

#### **4.1.6 Living green**

Evergreens. Christmas trees are a German tradition, and not part of the English observance at this time.

#### **4.1.7 No sword was in it**

The empty scabbard suggests the Prince of Peace.

#### **4.1.8 Baker’s shops**

Most families would not have their own oven, and so would take their dinner to the baker’s shop to cook it.

#### **4.1.9 Norfolk Biffins**

Baked apples, flattened in the form of a cake. Biffins are cultivated especially in Norfolk.

#### 4.1.10 Daws

... for *Christmas daws to peck at*. This is a reference to Othello:

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

Daws, aka Jackdaws, are a kind of bird, related to crows.

The line in Othello, and here, refers to honesty and openness - the wearing of one's true character in the open for everyone to see.

#### 4.1.11 Closed on the seventh day

Andrew Agnew (1793-1849), Sabbatarian promoter, took charge in 1832 of abortive parliamentary movement to protect the Lord's Day. See *Sunday Observance on two heads*, another work by Dickens, which lambastes this act of Parliament, and was probably very instrumental in getting it defeated. Basically, the law stated that everyone was required to abstain from work, abstain from strong drink, and go to church, on Sunday. Since Sunday was the only day off from work for most people, requiring church attendance on Sunday had the effect of removing their one day of leisure.

#### 4.1.12 The fashionable Parks

The high society of these times would, every afternoon, ride up and down Rotten Row, which was the main path in Hyde Park, to show off their finery. While someone of the Cratchit's social class would never presume to join them, it is this that is referred to when Peter yearns to show his linen in the fashionable Parks.



On a marginally related note, it's interesting to know that Rotten Row itself is a corruption of the french term *Route de roi*, which means *Kings' Road*. It was *the* place to be seen if you were anybody. Today,

Rotten Row (still so called) is the major thoroughfare of Hyde Park, running parallel to the Serpentine. In the picture shown here, the line of trees to the right is, I believe, where the Serpentine runs, and the large bunch of trees at the left is where the statue of Peter Pan now stands.

#### **4.1.13 Supported by an iron frame**

In “The Case of Tiny Tim,” Charles Callahan diagnoses Tiny Tim with Pott’s disease, also called tuberculosis spondylitis, or spinal tuberculosis.

Dr. Donald W. Lewis, in “What Was Wrong With Tiny Tim” diagnoses him with a kidney disease, renal tubular acidosis.

#### **4.1.14 Wash-house**

The wash-house was, as the name suggests, a building where the wash would be done. These buildings were often shared by several families.

There are a number of reasons why the pudding might be cooking in the wash house. The most likely one is that, being a poor house, they probably would not have had their own oven, and so were using the fire in the wash-house to cook it. As you saw above ( 4.1.8), they might usually take their dinner to the baker’s shop to cook it.

The copper was the large boiler in which the laundry was boiled. Although usually made of iron, the name was retained from an earlier time when they were made of copper.

#### **4.1.15 Twelfth-cakes**

Twelfth-cakes: A large cake used at the festivities of Twelfth-night, usually frosted and otherwise ornamented, and with a bean or coin introduced to determine the ‘king’ or ‘queen’ of the feast. That is, the person that bites into the coin is the king for the evening.

#### **4.1.16 half of half-a-quartern**

1/16 pint or 1.25 fluid ounces.

#### **4.1.17 Grog**

A drink consisting of spirits (originally rum) and water. Said to be short for grogram, and to have been applied first as a personal nickname to Admiral Vernon, from the fact of his wearing a grogram cloak, and afterwards transferred to the mixture which he ordered to be served out instead of neat spirit. Vernon’s order, dated Aug. 1740, is still extant. The statement that he wore a grogram cloak, and was thence nicknamed Old Grog, first appears explicitly in *Grose Dict. Vulg. Tongue*, 1796, but derives some support from Trotter’s allusion in a quotation from 1781.

According to Bernard Cornwell, and other writers, anyone in the British Navy was guaranteed a ration of rum every day as part of their payment. Taking the King’s (or Queen’s, as the case may be) shilling was not a way to become wealthy, but this, along with the right of taking booty in battle, made the navy much more

attractive than the army. Taking booty was officially forbidden to the army, but, of course, most officers would turn a blind eye in exchange for some of the takings.

#### **4.1.18 Tucker**

A piece of lace or the like, worn by women within or around the top of the bodice in the 17th and 18th c.; a frill of lace worn round the neck.

#### **4.1.19 Glee**

A musical composition, of English origin, for three or more voices (one voice to each part), set to words of any character, grave or gay, often consisting of two or more contrasted movements, and (in strict use) without accompaniment.

#### **4.1.20 Catch**

Originally, a short composition for three or more voices, which sing the same melody, the second singer beginning the first line as the first goes on to the second line, and so with each successive singer; a round.

#### **4.1.21 Yes and No**

20 Questions.

#### **4.1.22 Another blindman**

Presumably, Cupid himself.

#### **4.1.23 ... with all the letters of the alphabet**

This is a reference to a parlor game "I love my love with an A," in which each turn one must complete the sentence with the next letter of the alphabet.

#### **4.1.24 Twelfth Night**

Christmas is, of course, a season, not a day. Twelfth Night is usually January 6th, and is the 12th day of the twelve days of Christmas. Twelfth Night is usually a time of much revelry, and is the day when you can take down the Christmas tree (an innovation of the Victorian time) and other decorations. To do so earlier promised bad luck.

However, in the story, Twelfth Night parties appear to happen on Christmas night.



## 4.2 Notes

### 4.2.1 Dickens and social justice

Prior to Dickens, it was unfashionable to write about social issues. Books of this era are about the problems of the rich and powerful, not those of the poor and powerless. Dickens changes that with books like *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, and the positively scandalous *Little Dorrit*. He advances the notion that the less fortunate classes are human beings just like us, and that they are worthy not just of pity, but of compassion and inclusion in the larger society.

After his visit to the colonies prior to the Civil War, Dickens was very forthright in his criticisms of the practice of slavery, adding it to his set of ills perpetrated on the powerless by the uncaring aristocracy.

So, at the end of Stave Three, we see him talking about Ignorance and Want, the children of Man, who Man hopes will go away if they are ignored.

After all, Scrooge is an excellent man of business, as he says to Marley, and that is to be highly praised, both in 1843 and today, is it not? But, as Marley tells each of us, mankind is our business. And here at the end of this stave, Dickens tell us that curing want and ignorance is our business. Not the business of government (“Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?”) but the business of each of us.

### 4.2.2 The universality of Christmas

Also important to note in this stave is the people that the ghost chooses to visit. They are, for the most part, the people who have no reason to be happy. (“What reason have you to be gloomy? You’re rich enough!”)

Although Dickens shows everyone celebrating Christmas, it was actually fairly uncommon at this time. The Church, indeed, had discouraged the celebration of Christmas, as the popular celebrations of the holiday were often based on pagan customs, such as Christmas trees, yule logs, and the giving of gifts.

## 5 Stave Four : The Last Of The Three Spirits

### 5.1 Terms

#### 5.1.1 Pent-house roof

A roof sloping up from a wall.

#### 5.1.2 Snuff-box

Tobacco was largely held to be an item of great health benefits. Snorting snuff, and the subsequent sneeze, being very good for the lungs. Smoking, too, was known to open the lungs, and was prescribed for those with respiratory ailments.

#### 5.1.3 Old Scratch

The Devil. The source of the name is probably the Old Norse word *skratte*, meaning a wizard, goblin, monster, or devil.

#### 5.1.4 Skaiter

Probably skater. During the bleak midwinter, it was common for people to skate on the Thames.

However, this man of business can't make time for such frivolities. Just something else to think of.

Prior to very recent times, the Thames froze most years, and fairs were held out on the ice. The last great frost fair was held in January of 1814, with subsequent years producing increasingly less safe ice. These days it is very uncommon for the Thames to freeze over completely.

The Thames froze over in the winter of 1953/54, and has also done so a few times since then.

#### 5.1.5 Charwoman

Maid. Cleaning lady.

It should be noted that this charwoman was almost certainly hired by whoever was settling Scrooge's affairs, since Scrooge would never have hired one on his own. This accounts for the fact that he didn't recognize her. In various movie renditions, it appears that she is Scrooge's housekeeper, and that would not make much sense.

#### 5.1.6 Money

The money mentioned in this chapter is not particularly important, but it can be a little confusing to know what he's threatening when paying in sixpence and threatening to knock off half-a-crown. See Appendix 8 for more information on currency.

### **5.1.7 He took a child, and set him in the midst of them**

Mark 9:36 or Matthew 18:2

### **5.1.8 The colour?**

The color, of course, was black, since they were making mourning clothes. “The colour hurts my eyes.”

## **5.2 Notes**

### **5.2.1 Silence**

The silence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come is significant to me. The future is silent. It is only in the present that we can effect change, and in which our voice can be heard. Stated different, the future, if we choose to meditate on it, is a time of silence, *unless* we make our voice heard in the present.

## 6 Stave Five : The End Of It

### 6.1 Terms

#### 6.1.1 Laocoon

Laocoon was the Trojan priest who warned the people of Troy about the wooden horse left by the Greeks. This displeased Athena, who had two great sea serpents strangle Laocoon and his two sons. A famous statue depicting this event was unearthed in 1506, and is in the Vatican Museum.

#### 6.1.2 Walker

More fully, Hookey Walker, possibly after John “Hookey” Walker, who was a hook-nosed spy known for his lying. And, so, colloquially, signifies disbelief. “You’re pulling my leg.”

#### 6.1.3 Joe Miller

A Joe Miller was any stale joke. Joe Miller was a popular comic who was apparently not particularly funny. *Joe Miller’s Jest book* was a collection of his jokes and sayings.

#### 6.1.4 Sticking-plaister

Or Sticking plaster. An adhesive bandage.

#### 6.1.5 Next morning

The next day was Boxing day, or St. Stephen’s Day, the day on which employers give Christmas boxes to their employees, or, in more recent times, to the poor.

#### 6.1.6 Waistcoat

Since Bob probably didn’t have a waistcoat, this means he poked him in the ribs. Victorians were very reluctant to mention parts of the body, even when these parts seem thoroughly innocent to us.

#### 6.1.7 Strait-waistcoat

A straitjacket.

#### 6.1.8 Smoking Bishop

Mulled wine, made with a deep red wine, the color of a Bishop’s robes.

... over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop ...



### Smoking bishop

5 unpeeled, sweet oranges  
1 unpeeled grapefruit  
36 cloves  
1/4 pound of sugar  
2 bottles of red wine (strong)  
1 bottle of port

Wash the fruit and bake them in the oven until they are brownish. Turn once.  
Put them into a warmed earthenware bowl with six cloves pricked into each.  
Add the sugar and pour in the wine - not the port.  
Cover and leave in a warm place for a day.  
Squeeze the fruit into the wine and strain.  
Add the port and heat. DO NOT BOIL!

Serve smoking hot in small wine glasses.  
Yield: 15 to 20 servings

#### 6.1.9 Total Abstinence Principle

The Total Abstinence Principle was a pledge that Teetotalers took to abstain from alcoholic spirits. Thus, this is a pun on Scrooge's total abstinence from (supernatural) spirits.

## 7 Other

### 7.1 Names

It appears that Dickens was very intentional in picking the names for his characters. Perhaps I am reading too much into it. In most of Dickens' books, the names seem to have some significance, suggesting some character trait. However, it seems more likely in many of these cases that, 150 years on, the names and their use in these books have defined how we understand the words.

In *A Christmas Carol*, however, the names of important characters seem to refer directly to some characteristic of the individual, or some role that they play in the story.

#### 7.1.1 Ebenezer

'The stone of help' (I Samuel vii. 12); used as a name of a particular Methodist or Baptist chapel, and afterwards contemptuously to mean "dissenting chapel" (1856).

*Dissenters* are those who attend churches which are not the Church of England. Usually this was the Methodists, but also included the Baptists. There is much talk of the dissenters in "Of Human Bondage," too, by the way.

Ebenezer is probably here used because of the association with "rock," as Scrooge is a hard, cold individual,

hard and sharp as steel, from which no flint had ever struck out generous fire.

#### 7.1.2 Scrooge

From *Scroudge*: 'a crush, squeeze, or crowd' (1839), from such dialects as those spoken in Kent and Cornwall.

Alternate spellings are *scrowdge*, *scrowge* and *skrowge*.

Scrooge is, after all,

A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner.

#### 7.1.3 Bob

London slang for a coin worth 1.5 pence in the 14th c., and by 1837 a shilling. Bob Cratchit is not a terribly important character in this book, really. He is not clever, or attractive, or eloquent. He represents Scrooge's stinginess, but also, in toasting the "Founder of our feast," he represents the generosity of pure-hearted people in the face of ill treatment. To me, he also represents the important notion that your job is what you do to pay for the part of your life that matters. To Bob, that important part is his loving family. His name, I think, might also suggest his meagre income.

#### 7.1.4 Cratchit

A dilemma, a tool used by thatchers, or the stomach – hence, to eat heartily.

Bob Cratchit manages to eat heartily on a very small salary, as do many poor people who have very little. Although he has nothing, he is able to heartily enjoy the little that he has.

Also, Crotchit: a whimsical fancy, a peculiar notion held by an individual in opposition to popular opinion.

### 7.1.5 Jacob

In 1662 a Jacobus was a gold coin; otherwise, the name alludes to the biblical patriarch who in Genesis 30:40 made the inferior sheep he had been given breed faster.

### 7.1.6 Marley

From marl (soil); in Yorkshire, sleet.

There's also a story that, at a party, a conversation came up about uncommon last names. A Dr. Milton Marley, present at the party, said that he thought his own name very uncommon. Dickens is reported to have said "Your name shall be a household word before the year is out."

## 8 Victorian currency

Money was divided into pounds (£) shillings (s. or /-) and pennies (d.). Thus, 4 pounds, eight shillings and fourpence would be written as 4/8/4d. or 4-8-4d.

There were:

- 20 shillings in £1 - a shilling was often called 'bob', so 'ten bob' was 10/-
- 12 pennies in 1 shilling
- 240 pennies in £1

Pennies were broken down into other coins:

- a farthing (a fourth-thing) was 1/4 of a penny
- a halfpenny (hay-p'ny) was 1/2 of a penny

Other coins of a value less than 1/- were

- a half-groat (2d)  $6 \times 2d = 1/-$
- a threepenny bit (3d) made of silver  $4 \times 3d. = 1/-$
- a groat (4d)  $3 \times 4d = 1/-$
- sixpence (silver) - often called a 'tanner'  $2 \times 6d = 1/-$

Coins of more than 1/- but less than 1 in value were

- a two shilling piece (called a florin)  $10 \times 2/- = \text{£}1$
- a half-crown ( $2/6d$ )  $8 \times 2/6d = 1$
- a crown ( $5/-$ )  $4 \times 5/- = \text{£}1$
- ten shillings (a half-sovereign)  $2 \times 10/- = \text{£}1$
- a half-guinea ( $10/6d$ )  $2 \times 10/6d = \text{£}1/1/-$

A  $\text{£}1$  coin was called a Sovereign and was made of gold. A paper pound often was called a 'quid'.

Coins of more than  $\text{£}1$  were

- a guinea ( $\text{£}1/1/-$ )
- a  $\text{£}5$  coin



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