

(Yet) A(nother) Christmas Carol

Scene 1 – Scrooge's Office

Narrator: Marley wasn't dead. There is no doubt whatsoever about that. His wages were still being paid; and if the man who paid those wages, the chief accountant, said that Marley was alive, then Marley was very much still alive. Nobody argued with the chief accountant – even when the chief accountant paid the wages of twenty-five actors who hadn't been seen around the studios of Marley and Scrooge Productions, Ltd, since *The Sting* had hit the cinemas. And those into bank accounts with a distinct whiff of ozone about them.

No – Marley wasn't dead. But he was currently filming *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here*, so effectively, his career was.

And that left Scrooge, in the office, working away on another production. Or rather, staring through into the office of his personal assistant as *she* worked on another production. This screenplay, a dystopian fantasy entitled *The Hunger Matrix Runner Blade Maze*, was scheduled to begin filming the following month. Once, that is, the PA had performed minor surgery on the script: such as combining the psychopath goblin and the sentient jelly father-figure into one character to save money; and turning the eight-foot, heavily muscled hero into a five-foot tall ten-year-old girl with pigtails and glasses for reasons of political correctness.

It was while Scrooge was thus engaged that a voice assailed him from his office door.

Fred: A merry *A Christmas Carol*, uncle! Dickens save you!

Narrator: This was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, a charming young actor whose repertoire consisted of playing bartenders in *Eastenders*, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*. Hugely important roles, since the most vital truth these indistinguishable-from-life programmes convey, is that the one place all humans gravitate to at all hours of the day, no matter how miserable or impoverished they be, is the local pub.

Scrooge looked up at the sound of his nephew's voice.

Scrooge: Bah! Humbug!

Fred: *A Christmas Carol* a humbug, uncle? You don't mean that, I'm sure!

Scrooge: I do. What right have you to be talking about *A Christmas Carol* – particularly in the middle of February? What's so merry about that?

Fred: Come, then. What right have you to be dismissing it so? Every movie studio the world over starts thinking about filming a version of it at this time of year.

Scrooge: Bah! Humbug!

Fred: Don't be cross, uncle.

Scrooge: What else can I be when I live in such a world of fools as this? *A Christmas Carol*! Out upon *A Christmas Carol*! Do you know, nephew, how many versions of *A Christmas Carol* there have been on stage, film, television, radio, recording, opera and parody in all the years since the story was published in 1843?

Fred: Well – a few, perhaps.

Scrooge: Nephew, there have been more versions than there have been years since, that's how many! We've had traditional versions, modern-day versions, cartoon versions and puppet versions. We've had Muppet Christmas Carols, Micky Mouse Christmas Carols, silent Christmas Carols, musical Christmas Carols, and thinly-disguised versions with generally female employers being seven shades of abysmal towards their generally also female employees. Heaven save us, we've even had a Barbie Doll Christmas Carol!

Fred: But uncle – have we ever had a version where your namesake starts out good and ends up wicked? That would be a novelty, surely?

Scrooge: *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*, 1988. Don't you ever look up IMDB?

Fred: Only to see if I get a mention.

Scrooge: Slim chance of that. You're not exactly Johnny Depp, are you?

No, nephew. What's *A Christmas Carol* to you but a chance to be raking over the same old ground yet again? A chance for the Americans to take a quintessentially English story and give it a 'Hollywood twist', so help us? A chance for the special effects people to show how far we've come in a hundred years by not having the wires show during the flying scenes?

If I could work my will, nephew, every writer idiot who goes about with an *A Christmas Carol* script in their hands should be boiled in a Bob Cratchit and buried with a Tiny Tim through their heart. So they should!

Fred: Uncle!

Scrooge: Nephew! Forget *A Christmas Carol* and stick to the parts you know. At least you get to do a stupid song-and-dance act on *Children in Need* once a year. Much good would *A Christmas Carol* do for you on that score!

Fred: There are many films I've been in that I dare say won't have done me much good. *The Prisoner of Suspenders*, for a start – not to mention *Deep Tonsils*. But I am sure I have always thought of *A Christmas Carol* time as a good time. A time when one can legitimately call on Morgan Freeman and Sir Ian McKellan to leave *Dunthesping*, the actors' retirement home, don wigs and grouchy personae, and ham it up for all they're worth. And therefore, uncle, although I've never yet been in a production of it, I say, Dickens bless it!

Narrator: At this, the personal assistant in her office involuntarily applauded. Becoming immediately sensible of the impropriety, she bent back to her script and deleted three years of backstory from the life of the heroine's mother, who would be played by Judy Dench, since she has to be in everything.

Scrooge: (To PA) Let me hear another sound from you, and you'll be keeping your *A Christmas Carol* time doing Patrick Stewart's hairdressing on the latest *Star Trek* reboot.

(To Fred) You're a powerful speaker, sir. I wonder you've never hosted the Oscars' ceremony.

Fred: Come, don't be angry, uncle. At least think about who you might cast in the role of Small Boy Who Orders The Turkey Even Though It's Christmas Day And Surely The Poulterer's Would Be Shut?

Scrooge: Good afternoon!

Fred: I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute. Well – I've given it a good try on behalf of actors who specialise in dirt-grimed Victorian peasants, so I'll keep my humour to the last. So – a merry *A Christmas Carol*, uncle.

Scrooge: Good afternoon!

Fred: And a happy *New Year's Eve*, starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Zac Efron.

Scrooge: Good afternoon!

Narrator: His nephew left the room without an angry word, notwithstanding. He stopped at the outer door to bestow a BAFTA on the PA, who thanked the members of the academy, the producers, the director, her fellow cast members, everybody who came to watch the film for making it the highest-grossing production in the history of cinema, her parents, her pet dog, the entire population of China – individually, by name – and finally, Jim Carrey for not ruining the film by being in it.

Scrooge: That's another one! My PA, with 60,000 a year, a wife and three children, and a holiday home in Barbados, talking about *A Christmas Carol* and how she'd be perfect for the part of Belle as long as we could do something radical and have young Scrooge played by Anne Hathaway.

Narrator: This lunatic, in letting Scrooge's nephew out, had let two other people in. They were non-speaking extras, either both male, both female, one of each, or two of neither, depending on who's in charge of the casting, and now they stood in Scrooge's office. They had scripts in their hands, and bowed to him.

Extra 1: ---?

Scrooge: I am Mr Scrooge. Mr Marley is away eating locusts at the moment.

Extra 2: ---

Scrooge: I'm sure he's surviving very well, thank you. Assuming he's still in the jungle, he has Nadine Coyle's bikini for company – at least that'll make up for Ant and Dec being there.

Extra 1: ---?

Scrooge: So – you're wanting to know what walk-on roles there might be for you in the forthcoming version of *A Christmas Carol*, are you? Well – there aren't any! Because there is to be no forthcoming version from this studio!

Extra 2: ---!

Scrooge: I am well aware there are actors seeking employment at this time of year who rely on the *A Christmas Carol* market. However, that is no concern of mine. Are there no more *Star Wars* films requiring Ewoks?

Extra 1: ---

Scrooge: Oh, yes. I forgot that Warwick Davis plays all those, and is merely multiplied by CGI. However – are there not still Quentin Tarantino films in which people are tortured in unbelievably gruesome ways?

Extra 2: ---

Scrooge: And what about the impossibly sunshiney fairs in *Midsomer Murders*. Do they not need people standing behind stalls pretending to be pleased by children winning goldfish in the Hook the Duck game?

Extra 1: ---

Scrooge: I was afraid from what you said that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course. Like Neil Dudgeon remembering he was once a decent actor.

Extra 2: ---

Scrooge: So! These simpletons are only able to work in roles that require top hats and bustles, are they? And what is wrong with series ninety-six of *Downton Abbey*? I am sure that is to be filmed shortly; let them obtain work there, if they are so disturbed.

Extra 1: ---

Scrooge: Well, it's none of my concern if Maggie Smith has the final say on all casting! Let them impersonate Bill Nighy – she seems to like him well enough. Meanwhile, let me get back to my business, which is making films that are innovative and nothing to do with flying ghosts. Good afternoon to you both!

Narrator: Seeing clearly that it would be useless to pursue their point – plus the fact that they'd worn out their voices talking so much – the two withdrew. Scrooge resumed watching his PA's labours with an improved opinion of himself, and in more facetious temper than was usual with him.

Scene 2 – Scrooge's Home

Narrator: We now gloss over the end-of-day conversation between Scrooge and his personal assistant, Roberta Cratchit, since the scriptwriter could make nothing particularly funny from it. (And believe me, he tried.) We also skip all the atmospheric waffle about the weather that clutters up much of the original story, as nobody ever reads that anyway. Instead, we repair to Scrooge's home, a penthouse flat in Canary Wharf.

Now, it is a fact that every version of *A Christmas Carol* ever made features the scene where Scrooge's door-knocker changes into the face of Jacob Marley. And quite rightly so; it's a pivotal moment. Nobody, though, has ever explained why it is that the door-knocker is invariably shown as being the head of a lion, since Dickens' only description of its appearance is that it is 'very large'.

Unfortunately for *this* version, being a modern-day one, Scrooge doesn't have a knocker but a Smart Bell. And if there's ever been one of those made in the shape of a lion's head, then Amazon or Google has yet to market it.

And so we move on, passing over more waffle about how Scrooge gets to his sitting-room. Instead, we find him already there, sitting in a comfy chair, waiting for the next part of the story to happen.

Narrator: As he threw his head back in the chair, caught it on the rebound and reattached it to his shoulders, his glance (*cont*) happened to rest upon his iPad. This, the Mark One version, being not updatable to the latest operating system – since if it was, Apple couldn't screw more money out of those who insist that their products are superior to Microsoft's – was sitting on the coffee table serving as a coaster. It was with great astonishment, and with a strange, inexplicable horror, that, as he looked, Scrooge saw this iPad flicker into life.

Jacob: Scrooge. Ebenezer Scrooge.

Scrooge: Wha-?

Narrator: Scrooge crept to where the equipment lay. Upon the screen he saw, to his utter dread, as ghastly a sight as mortal man could ever encounter in the worst of his nightmares. A creature so vile, so disgusting, it sent the flesh crawling along his spine and turned his blood to ice. A sheen of sweat broke out upon his forehead, and...

Scrooge: All right, all right, don't milk it! Bloody voice-over artists!

Narrator: Well, excuse me!

Scrooge: Just get on with it. And don't use five words where one will do. You've already rattled on far more than flesh and blood can stand. Anybody would think you were Dickens himself. Or, worse, Thomas Hardy!

Narrator: Very well, if you insist. (*Clears throat*) Scrooge stared at the apparition in horror.

Scrooge: Who are you?

Jacob: Ask me, rather, who I was.

Scrooge: Who were you, then? You're rather particular for someone with a face like a year's-worth of dirty underpants.

Jacob: Before I ended up surrounded by trees, bugs and celebrities no-one's ever heard of, I was your partner, Jacob Marley.

Scrooge: Jacob? Are you sure you're you?

Jacob: Of course I am! Why do you doubt it?

Scrooge: If that is you, Jacob, what on earth has happened to your appearance?

Jacob: My appearance? Oh, that's nothing to worry about. I just happen to have a crocodile attached to my face at the moment. They call it a 'challenge', or some such thing.

Scrooge: I see. I must say, it rather suits you. But – returning to Dickens' original lines – why are you fettered so?

Jacob: It is because of the complete non-entity I have become that I wear this scaly nose extension.

Scrooge: But why do you trouble me? And why are you on *Friends Reunited*? Nobody ever uses that site any more.

Narrator: At this, the apparition on Scrooge's iPad raised a terrible cry, and wrung its hands, which Scrooge could now see were smothered in Wallabies.

Jacob: It is required of every film producer that the spirit within him should, in his life, cause him to make at least one version of *A Christmas Carol*. Preferably one every year.

Scrooge: *A Christmas Carol* again! Am I never to be rid of this pestilence?

Jacob: And that, Ebenezer Scrooge, is why I have dread news for you. Your invitation to join me in this travesty of a television programme is in the post this very minute!

Narrator: Scrooge fell...

Jacob: And by the way, I'm using *Friends Reunited* because this is Australia. As they say, there's only one difference between Australia and a strawberry yoghurt; the yoghurt has a live culture.

Narrator: Scrooge fell upon his knees and clasped his hands before his face.

Scrooge: Jacob! Old Jacob Marley, don't tell me that! And please don't tell me jokes that wouldn't even have passed muster on a Les Dawson show. Speak comfort to me, Jacob!

Jacob: I have none to give. Just a box of kangaroos which is winging its way to you even now.

Narrator: Scrooge was much dismayed to hear his partner say this, and began to quack exceedingly.

Scrooge: Quack?

Narrator: Pardon me. Scrooge was much dismayed to hear his partner say this, and began to *quake* exceedingly.

Scrooge: Concentrate, will you!

Jacob: There is a chance and hope, though, that you may escape my fate.

Scrooge: What? I may return the kangaroos unopened?

Jacob: As long as you have an Amazon Prime account, yes.

Scrooge: But what else must I do?

Jacob: That is for others to tell. You will be visited by three actors.

Narrator: Scrooge's countenance fell almost as low as the box-office takings for *Lolita*, starring Jeremy Irons.

Scrooge: Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?

Jacob: It is.

Scrooge: I – I think I'd rather not.

Jacob: And why not?

Scrooge: Actors bring me out in a terrible rash.

Jacob: These actors have all played, are playing, or will play, Ebenezer Scrooge. Without their visits, you cannot hope to escape being plunged face-first into dingo excrement. Expect the first tomorrow when the bell tolls one.

Scrooge: A.M or P.M?

Jacob: What is it now?

Scrooge: At the moment, it's P.M.

Jacob: Then it'll be either of those two. Expect the second on the next night at the same time, and the third the next night when the bell tolls midnight o'clock and three-quarters, as Spike Milligan once wrote.

Look to see me no more, Ebenezer, since the broadband connection here is abysmal. And look that, for your own sake, you remember what has passed between us!

Narrator: When it had said these words, the crocodile-faced apparition withdrew from the screen, and Scrooge became sensible of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret.

Actor 1: If only I'd had the opportunity to play third orphan from the left in a Victorian workhouse...

Actor 2: Oh, why could I never don a battered top hat and pick a pocket or two in a cheery cockerney way?

Actor 1: But that's the wrong film.

Actor 2: Well, they're all the same.

Actor 1: True.

Narrator: And Marley, after listening for a moment, joined in the mournful dirge.

Jacob: They're not at all the same thing, you nitwits! You're both the weakest nonentity. Goodbye!

Actor 1: God, you're going back a bit!

Actor 2: And he reckons we're out of touch!

Narrator: And with that, the iPad fell as dead as the dialogue in a Sylvester Stallone movie.

Scrooge closed the cover, which had worn as thin as the jokes in this spoof. He tried to say 'Humbug!', but stopped at the first syllable. And being, from the emotion he had undergone, or the fatigues of the day, or the prospect of a box-full of kangaroos falling through his letter-box any moment, much in need of repose, went straight to the nearest nightclub and fell into a Tequila Slammer upon the instant.

And soon, Scrooge is visited by the three promised Scrooge actors:

the Scrooge of A Christmas Carol Past (Michael Caine);

the Scrooge of A Christmas Carol Present (Guy Pearce);

and the Scrooge of A Christmas Carol Future (Olivia Coleman, because it's bound to happen).

Between them, they convince Scrooge of the need for yet another film version of the story, and so he, in humility, repairs to his nephew's dwelling to importune him to play the part of Bob Cratchit, or Bob's husband, depending on how up-to-date the production is.

On the way, he runs into the two extras who petitioned him in his office.

Scrooge: My dear sirs, or misses, or sir and miss! How do you do? How good of you to call on me yesterday. A merry *A Christmas Carol* to you both.

Extra 1: ---?

Scrooge: Yes. Scrooge is my name, and I fear it may not be pleasant to you. Allow me to ask both your pardons. And will you have the goodness to appear in the production of Dickens' magnificent story I intend to film for the Christmas market?

Extra 2: ---!

Scrooge: I have the very roles for you. You can play the parts of the two callers who ask Scrooge for donations.

Extra 1: Huh! Bloody typecasting!

Extra 2: Hey! You had a line there!

Extra 1: So I did. Hmm – wonder if that means I get more money?

Scrooge: I've not gone that soft.

Extra 1: Bugger!

Narrator: And – apart from this one blip – Scrooge was better than his word. He filmed it all, with stunning CGI and Daniel Radcliffe in the lead role. And it was always said of him that he knew how to keep *A Christmas Carol* well.

And so, as Tiny Tim observed:

Tiny Tim: Dickens bless us, every one!

Here! Why am I being played by Micky Mouse in this version?

The End (until somebody films it again next year)