

68TH YEAR

Reader's
Digest

DECEMBER 1989

An article a day of enduring significance, in condensed permanent booklet form

The Second Greatest Christmas Story Ever Told

BY THOMAS J. BURNS

From its first publication, "A Christmas Carol" has charmed and inspired millions. There have been scores of editions and translations, and many stage, TV and film adaptations, making it one of the best-loved stories of all time. Less well known is the fact that this little book of celebration grew out of a dark period in the author's career—and, in some ways, changed the course of his life forever.

ON an early October evening in 1843, Charles Dickens stepped from the brick-and-stone portico of his home near Regent's Park in London. The cool air of dusk was a relief from the day's unseasonal humidity, as the author began his nightly walk through what he called "the black streets" of the city.

A handsome man with flowing brown hair and normally sparkling

eyes, Dickens was deeply troubled. The 31-year-old father of four had thought he was at the peak of his career. *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* had all been popular; and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which he considered his finest novel yet, was being published in monthly installments. But now, the celebrated writer was facing serious financial problems.

Some months earlier, his publisher had revealed that sales of the new novel were not what had been expected, and it might be necessary to sharply reduce Dickens's monthly advances against future sales.

The news had stunned the author. It seemed his talent was being questioned. Memories of his childhood poverty resurfaced. Dickens was supporting a large, extended family, and his expenses were already nearly more than he could handle. His father and brothers were pleading for loans. His wife, Kate, was expecting their fifth child.

All summer long, Dickens worried about his mounting bills, especially the large mortgage that he owed on his house. He spent time at a seaside resort, where he had trouble sleeping and walked the cliffs for hours. He knew that he needed an idea that would earn him a large sum of money, and he needed the idea quickly. But in his depression, Dickens was finding it difficult to write. After returning to London, he hoped that re-

suming his nightly walks would help spark his imagination.

THE YELLOW GLOW from the flickering gas lamps lit his way through London's better neighborhoods. Then gradually, as he neared the Thames River, only the dull light from tenement windows illuminated the streets, now litter-strewn and lined with open sewers. The elegant ladies and well-dressed gentlemen of Dickens's neighborhood were replaced by bawdy streetwalkers, pickpockets, footpads and beggars.

The dismal scene reminded him of the nightmare that often troubled his sleep: *A 12-year-old boy sits at a worktable piled high with pots of black boot paste. For 12 hours a day, six days a week, he attaches labels on the endless stream of pots to earn the six shillings that will keep him alive.*

The boy in the dream looks through the rotting warehouse floor into the cellar, where swarms of rats scurry about. Then he raises his eyes to the dirt-streaked window, dripping with condensation from London's wintry weather. The light is fading now, along with the boy's young hopes. His father is in debtors' prison, and the youngster is receiving only an hour of school lessons during his dinner break at the warehouse. He feels helpless, abandoned. There may never be celebration, joy or hope again. . . .

This was no scene from the author's imagination. It was a period from his early life. Fortunately, Dickens's father had inherited

some money, enabling him to pay off his debts and get out of prison—and his young son escaped a dreary fate.

Now the fear of being unable to pay his own debts haunted Dickens. Warily, he started home from his long walk, no closer to an idea for the “cheerful, glowing” tale he wanted to tell than he’d been when he started out.

However, as he neared home, he felt the sudden flash of inspiration. What about a Christmas story! He would write one for the very people he passed on the black streets of London. People who lived and struggled with the same fears and longings he had known, people who hungered for a bit of cheer and hope.

But Christmas was less than three months away! How could he manage so great a task in so brief a time? The book would have to be short, certainly not a full novel. It would have to be finished by the end of November to be printed and distributed in time for Christmas sales. For speed, he struck on the idea of adapting a Christmas-goblin story from a chapter in *The Pickwick Papers*.

He would fill the story with the scenes and characters his readers loved. There would be a small, sickly child; his honest but ineffectual father; and, at the center of the piece, a selfish villain, an old man with a pointed nose and shriveled cheeks.

As the mild days of October gave

way to a cool November, the manuscript grew, page by page, and the story took life. The basic plot was simple enough for children to understand, but evoked themes that would conjure up warm memories and emotions in an adult’s heart: *After retiring alone to his cold, barren apartment on Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly London businessman, is visited by the spirit of his dead partner, Jacob Marley. Doomed by his greed and insensitivity to his fellow man when alive, Marley’s ghost wanders the world in chains forged of his own indifference. He warns Scrooge that he must change, or suffer the same fate. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come appear and show Scrooge poignant scenes from his life and what will occur if he doesn’t mend his ways. Filled with remorse, Scrooge renounces his former selfishness and becomes a kind, generous, loving person who has learned the true spirit of Christmas.*

GRADUALLY, in the course of his writing, something surprising happened to Dickens. What had begun as a desperate, calculated plan to rescue himself from debt—“a little scheme,” as he described it—soon began to work a change in the author. As he wrote about the kind of Christmas he loved—joyous family parties with clusters of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling; cheerful carols, games, dances and gifts; delicious feasts of roast



day's work. "I was very much affected by the little book," he later wrote a newspaperman, and was "reluctant to lay it aside for a moment." A friend and Dickens's future biographer, John Forster, took note of the "strange mastery" the story held over the author. Dickens told a professor in America how, when writing, he "wept, and laughed, and wept again." Dickens even took charge of the design of the book, deciding on a gold-stamped cover, a red-and-green title page with colored endpapers, and four hand-colored etchings

Hand-colored etchings from the first edition of "A Christmas Carol" depict visits to Ebenezer Scrooge by Marley's ghost and (right) the ghost of Christmas Present

goose, plum pudding, fresh breads, all enjoyed in front of a blazing yule log—the joy of the season he cherished began to alleviate his depression.

A Christmas Carol captured his heart and soul. It became a labor of love. Every time he dipped his quill pen into his ink, the characters seemed magically to take life: Tiny Tim with his crutches, Scrooge cowering in fear before the ghosts, Bob Cratchit drinking Christmas cheer in the face of poverty.

Each morning, Dickens grew excited and impatient to begin the

and four engraved woodcuts. To make the book affordable to the widest audience possible, he priced it at only five shillings.

At last, on December 2, he was finished, and the manuscript went to the printers. On December 17, the author's copies were delivered, and Dickens was delighted. He had never doubted that *A Christmas Carol* would be popular. But neither he nor his publisher was ready for the overwhelming response that came. The first edition of 6000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve, and as the

little book's heartwarming message spread, Dickens later recalled, he received "by every post, all manner of strangers writing all manner of letters about their homes and hearths, and how the *Carol* is read aloud there, and kept on a very little shelf by itself." Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray said of the *Carol*: "It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness."

Despite the book's public acclaim, it did not turn into the immediate financial success that Dickens had hoped for, because of the quality production he demanded and the low price he placed on the book. Nevertheless, he made enough money from it to scrape by, and *A Christmas Carol's* enormous popularity revived his audience for subsequent novels, while giving a fresh, new direction to his life and career.

Although Dickens would write many other well-received and financially profitable books—*David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*—nothing would ever quite equal the soul-satisfying

joy he derived from his universally loved little novel. In time, some would call him the Apostle of Christmas. And, at his death in 1870, a poor child in London was heard to ask: "Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"

In a very real sense, Dickens



popularized many aspects of the Christmas we celebrate today, including great family gatherings, seasonal drinks and dishes and gift giving. Even our language has been enriched by the tale. Who has not

READER'S DIGEST

known a "Scrooge," or uttered "Bah! Humbug!" when feeling irritated or disbelieving. And the phrase "Merry Christmas!" gained wider usage after the story appeared.

In the midst of self-doubt and confusion, a man sometimes does his best work. From the storm of tribulation comes a gift. For Charles Dickens, a little Christmas novel brought new-found faith in himself and in the redemptive joy of the season.

Reprints of this article are available. See page 232.



Post Cards

IN ONE of *New York* magazine's competition features, edited by Mary Ann Madden, readers were asked to compose a letter one would just as soon not receive. Here are some of the contributions:

Dear Ralph and Margaret: I'm sure the reason we did not receive our invitation to Amanda's wedding is due to some mix-up in the postal system, but never fear, we will all be happy. . . . —Irwin Litvack

Dear Joan: You once asked me what you could do to help. . . . —Joan Ellis

Dear Dad: First I want to emphasize that no one in either car was hurt. —John Foshee

. . . So why, you wonder, a letter after all these years? Well, I'm writing my autobiography, and I'm just at the part concerning our affair. . . . —Diana Ver Nooy

Dear Irving: Remember the old vase my Aunt Julia left me that you broke at my party? You wanted to reimburse me, and I said, "How about a couple of hundred bucks?" But you thought that was too much and insisted I get an appraisal. Well, buddy, I hope you're sitting down, because the museum's Curator of Twelfth Century Art. . . . —Ed Savage

Dear Thelma: I have decided to write this because I have always respected you and have always believed that you would expect nothing less from me than complete honesty. . . . —Lise Blumenthal

Dear Mr. Cohn: In response to your letter concerning pension checks not received by you, our records indicate that you are deceased. . . . —David Cohn

Recently you purchased from us a home pregnancy diagnostic kit. We wish to call your attention to a mistake in the instructions. . . .

—Don Hauptman