

## 4.

# "Are There No Prisons?"

## Scrooge and the British Poor

### Part I

"Are there no prisons? . . . And the Union workhouses? . . . Are they still in operation? . . . The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigor, then?"

With these words, spoken by Ebenezer Scrooge, Charles Dickens introduces one of the central issues of *A Christmas Carol*: the widespread indifference to the plight of the poor in the England of the mid-nineteenth century.

#### *The Poor Laws: 1547-1834*

In England, until 1547, the relief of poverty was considered essentially a moral and religious duty, not a responsibility of government. The church dispensed alms, and voluntary charities were established to aid the poor. But these methods eventually proved inadequate, and in 1547 the City of London imposed a compulsory tax, called the *poor rate*. In subsequent years, a number of other British laws were passed to address the problems of the poor.

#### *"Reform" of The Poor Laws*

By the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the poor rates levied to support the workhouses and general relief were so high in some locales that they threatened to ruin the district. As a consequence, the new Poor Law of 1834 was passed. This law reformed the system, but did so with terrible consequences for the poor.



Sir Luke Fildes, "The Charity Ward"

The "reform" measure came at a time when the Industrial Revolution had brought hundreds of thousands of British people from rural areas to the cities in search of work. The employers of Dickens' time were not all as indifferent to their employees' fate as Scrooge is, but relationships between workers and employers in the mid-nineteenth century were very different from today's. There were no unions; layoffs or mass firings were routine tactics when profits slumped; and over all hovered the "iron law of wage" that pushed salaries to the lowest amount that workers would accept. For every man or woman who would not accept pay cuts, there were scores who would. The Industrial Revolution created a whole new class of urban poor.

#### *The Workhouse*

The workhouse to which Scrooge referred was a lodging place where the destitute and unemployed moved when they could no longer support themselves. There they found cheerless shelter. The residents were also supposed to be given some useful labor. The jobs done at workhouses never amounted to much, though, and prior to 1834 many poor people preferred the workhouse to outside employment where wages were low and prices high. One of the directives of the new Poor Law, however, was designed to prevent people from making that choice. Workhouse subsistence was set low enough to be more miserable than even the worst low-paying job outside. And, after 1834, families that went to the workhouse were broken up and rigidly separated by gender.

#### *Debtor's Prison*

When Scrooge asks sardonically, "Are there no prisons?" he is inquiring not only about penitentiaries to confine felons, but also about debtor's prison, that peculiar institution for dealing with people who could not repay what they had borrowed. At the age of twelve, Dickens had become familiar with such places: his father spent more than three months in London's Marshalsea Prison for a debt of 40 pounds. Debtor's prison was by no means a pleasant place, but the entire family was allowed to join the prisoner at relatively low cost and they could come and go, though the debtor could not.

# “Are There No Prisons?”

## Part II

# 5.

### *Wages and Prices*

His father's imprisonment for debt corresponded to the darkest months of young Charles Dickens' own life. At the age of twelve, he was placed in a job at a "blacking warehouse," labelling bottles of shoe polish. He worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. six days a week, with an hour for lunch and a half-hour for tea in the afternoon. He was paid 6 shillings a week — 12 English pennies a day — but this meager wage stretched rather far. Dickens remained poor into his early twenties; some years later, when he earned 15 shillings a week, he had to pay 6-1/2 shillings for a textbook he needed in order to prepare himself to be a court reporter. Fifteen shillings a week, of course, is the small wage Scrooge pays to Bob Cratchit.

But, Bob Cratchit had six children, although it would seem that his daughter Martha was working outside the home. The other five lived at home, and survived, somehow, on Mr. Scrooge's grudging 15 shillings a week.

### *Ignorance and Want: The Children of Poverty*

Let us return, now, to young Charles Dickens at his menial job, his father in debtor's prison, and his hopes for the future diminished. In 1824, school for a twelve-year-old was neither compulsory nor free. The public school system was not to develop for many decades. Children working 63 hours a week, as many did during the Industrial Revolution, had neither the time for school nor the required tuition fee. Furthermore, the quality of schools varied widely. Any-



*Mrs. Dilber sells Scrooge's bed-curtains. (Arthur Rackham)*

one who wished could open a school, set fees, advertise, and accept students. No agency controlled the curriculum offered or certified the competence of the teachers. Yet, Dickens was overjoyed at his release from what he felt to be the degrading labor at the warehouse when his father decided, finally, that Charles should return to school.

Years later, when Dickens was internationally famous, he not only involved himself in private charities for the dispossessed, but also supported the establishment of institutions to provide the benefits of serious education and culture to working people. Some of his most famous speeches were made at fund-raisers for such organizations. During 1843, the year he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens toured one of the so-called Ragged Schools. These schools had been set up by concerned people to provide free education for the

children of the impoverished.

Surely, Dickens had in mind his experience in the Ragged Schools, together with his own bitter memory of his sentence to the blacking warehouse, when he introduced those two miserable children — Ignorance and Want — from beneath the skirts of the Ghost



*Many carolers in Dickens' time were actually beggars, as in this sketch by Robert Seymour.*

of Christmas Present. Dickens describes them: "They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish. . . . Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity. . . has

monsters half so horrible and dread."

Scrooge, at the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, has isolated himself from the social network in which he functions. Like Marley before him, he denies responsibility for the people among whom he lives — neither his nephew nor his employee can move him to any recognition of the interdependence of people. He is especially rude to the philanthropist who asks for a donation to lighten the burden of the miserable at this season of good will. For Scrooge, unfortunate people are merely abstractions. They are the numbers in a remorseless mathematical formula devised by Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) who argued that food production increases arithmetically while population increases geometrically. The inevitable consequence is starvation for the "surplus" population that Scrooge scornfully alludes to at the beginning of the book. But the children Ignorance and Want are made real to Scrooge.

He recoils in horror — both at the ugliness of Ignorance and Want and at their menace. "Have they no refuge or resource?" Scrooge asks. "Are there no prisons?" says the Spirit, turning to him for the last time with his own words. "Are there no workhouses?"

Spiritually revived, Scrooge now understands that the prisons and the workhouses are neither appropriate nor reasonable refuges and resources. Now Scrooge sees, as Dickens himself saw, not only misery, but danger. Ignorance and Want, Dickens tells us, must be eliminated not only because it is inhuman to turn one's back on such pain, but also because Ignorance and Want, left to breed in darkness, will grow desperate enough to consume the comfortable world that refuses to acknowledge them.