

A Steampunk Christmas Carol
Adapted by Jared McDaris from Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"
[Sample]

Lights are dim, but warm. K2-AC, a steam-powered robot, totters onto CS, where it adopts an awkward, presentational stance. The whistle of a ready teapot emerges from the robot. Some programming kicks into effect, and it speaks.

K2

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

At some point in the previous soliloquy, an ENGINEER has entered. The ENGINEER inspects K2 with curiosity, then confusion, then irritation. Eventually, a group of children creep in from all corners and observe the oration as well.

*Before K2 can finish the above speech, the ENGINEER flips a switch or turns a dial on the robot. K2 trips and repeats a few words like a broken record, then stalls. The ENGINEER produces an **instrument** of some kind and makes some adjustments; then removes a **cartridge** from the robot and replaces it with a new one. K2 springs back to life.*

K2

(sings) You've got to pick a pocket or two, boys, you've got to pick a pocket or two!

*The ENGINEER immediately shuts K2 down again, then replaces the **second cartridge** with a **third**.*

K2

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more! *(shudders, stalls, then)* God for Harry, England, and Saint George!

*The ENGINEER shuts K2 down again and removes the **cartridge**. Fumbling through all the supplies, the ENGINEER cannot find the right cartridge. Slowly, s/he looks out at the children. One of them timidly holds out a **fourth cartridge**. Eying the child narrowly, the ENGINEER approaches, takes the **fourth cartridge**, and inserts it into K2.*

K2

Marley was dead to begin with!

The children gasp!

ENGINEER

Ah hah! (*notices the children*) Oh, don't worry, this isn't a scary story – well... It is, but... it's also a Christmas story. Well, it's about... Marley is dead.

The children gasp!

ENGINEER

No no! Not just Marley! There are other dead folks as well!

The one of the children shrieks.

ENGINEER

Wait! Let me start again... all right... Perhaps I should start out by saying it has a happy ending after all, and it's a very inspiring story, and of great historical import, and—

K2

Marley was dead!

Gasps, then silence.

K2

To begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the chief undertaker, and the chief mourner. *Scrooge* had signed it: and *Scrooge's* signature was as good as gold. Old Marley was dead as a doornail. This must be understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. (*shudders*) This is my favorite part!

ENGINEER

Never mind the commentary, K2, stay on it.

K2

(*twitches, then*) In life, Marley had been the senior partner in *Scrooge's* business. Seven years had passed since Marley gave up the ghost (*shudders*) or at least rented out the ghost for a bit, eh?

ENGINEER

No one likes a comedian, K2.

K2

No one likes a comedian? What a dreadful thought. (*twitches*) and business ran very much as it always had. No one had seemed very affected by the old miser's death, least of all his partner *Scrooge*. But then, *Scrooge* wouldn't be.

*Ebenezer SCROOGE enters. He is a sharp, cold, merciless, loveless man, dressed like a poor undertaker. He holds a worn **ledger** and a fancy **laser-pen** (his one indulgence). He is making notes in his **ledger** and seems sourly ignorant of anyone else's existence. A jeweler's **loop** is affixed to his hat, which he uses to inspect the **ledger** more carefully.*

ENGINEER

Now, this is *my* favorite part! Tell them! Tell them about Scrooge!

K2

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!

ENGINEER

Yes! Covetous old sinner! Did you, did you mention the grasping?

K2

Yes.

ENGINEER

And the scraping?

K2

I did.

ENGINEER

And the clutching?

K2

Are you programmed to tell this story or am I?

ENGINEER

Oh, I do beg your pardon. Go on, if you please.

K2

I do please. (*twitch*) Scrooge moved like a smoggy vapor through the streets of London, acknowledging none and *being* acknowledged by none. And that... he said... was just how he liked it.

ENGINEER

Except for one time of year! Tell them about Christmas.

K2

I'm getting to it!

ENGINEER

Sorry! Sorry!

K2

I should hope so. (*shudder, twitch*) When Christmas came, everyone was in a festive, neighborly, loving mood, and bid good day and Merry Christmas to all.

CHILD

Merry Christmas!

SCROOGE

(*still absorbed in his ledger*) Bah... humbug...

K2

That was all he ever said. Celebration, relaxation, love, it was all humbug to his frozen heart.

ENGINEER

But oh! those Seasons Greetings grated on his bones.

SECOND CHILD

Merry Christmas!

SCROOGE

Hrm, humbug...

The CHILDREN begin crossing about as though in the busy streets of London, offering desultory "Merry Christmas" greetings to each other and, occasionally, to SCROOGE. SCROOGE tries to focus on his ledger, offering grumbles and humbugs, growing more and more frustrated.

K2

For there was nothing Scrooge so hated as comradery, well-wishing, and kindness. And nothing through all the year so encapsulated these enemies as—

*FRED suddenly bursts onstage: an ebullient young man of modest means, wealthy in his friends and family. He comes bearing a **lantern** and a **parcel**.*

FRED

Merry Christmas!

SCROOGE

BAH!!!

Everyone freezes.

SCROOGE

HUMBUG!!!

The CHILDREN scatter and exit. The ENGINEER hits the deck. Silence.

K2

Scrooge's nephew, Fred, had come upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of the young man's approach.

K2 exits. The ENGINEER crawls offstage in the same direction. The lighting becomes colder: FRED'S lantern is the only source of warmth. SCROOGE moves about the stage, seeming to take stock of his possessions, which he marks in his ledger.

FRED

Uncle Scrooge?

SCROOGE

Hurm... seventeen bevel springs... eight and a half Bunsen burners...

FRED

Uncle Scrooge!

SCROOGE

(still not looking away from his work) Hrm... Uh? Yes? What?

FRED

I said Merry Christmas.

SCROOGE

And I said humbug. What of it?

FRED

Oh, but you can't mean that, can you Uncle Scrooge?

SCROOGE

Ratchet! Ratchet! Get in here at once!

*Barb RATCHET scuttles into the room. She is a threadbare tinker and clerk, permanently bent over from spending her days hunched over a candle for warmth. She carries with her a tiny **candle** and a **wrench**.*

RATCHET

Mister Scrooge?

SCROOGE

Why have you got that candle lit?

RATCHET

For warmth, Mister Scrooge.

SCROOGE

Foolish waste. Well, it's your candle, do as you like.

FRED

Uncle, why do you keep it so dark and cold in here?

SCROOGE

What? Am I to waste money on a furnace, just for your visits? Ratchet, why are there only one-hundred-forty-three washers in this drawer?

RATCHET

Mister Scrooge?

SCROOGE

There should be one-hundred-forty-four washers in this drawer. Why are there only one-hundred-forty-three?

RATCHET

Are you certain, Mister Scrooge?

SCROOGE

Am I certain? Do I look like a man who wastes his time with uncertainties?

RATCHET

No sir.

SCROOGE

Well then?

RATCHET

(reviewing her ledger) I think... I think perhaps...

SCROOGE

Yes?

RATCHET

We sold two-dozen washers to Madam Tinwhistle yesterday afternoon.

SCROOGE

Yes! *I* had one-hundred-sixty-eight washers in stock, *you* sold twenty-four washers to Madam Tinwhistle, and now *I* have one-hundred-forty-three washers in stock instead of the one-hundred-forty-four *I should* have. Where is the errant washer?

RATCHET

Perhaps...

SCROOGE

I am not interested in “perhaps,” Ratchet. I am interested in certainties. Where is it?

RATCHET

Perhaps, that is, I can’t be certain—

SCROOGE

If you cannot be certain, then what value are you to me, Mz Ratchet?

Awkward pause. FRED shuffles about awkwardly, clearing his throat and looking at his feet. As he stares down...

FRED

Ah! (*bends down and picks up the errant **washer**, leaving his **parcel** on the ground*)
Here it is! Dropped on the ground during the sale, no doubt.

RATCHET

Oh, thank Tesla!

*RATCHET drops her **wrench** into a pocket, grabs the **washer**, and presents it to SCROOGE like a desperate offering to an angry god. Silence, as SCROOGE does nothing. After a moment, RATCHET replaces the **washer** where it belongs.*

SCROOGE

(*to FRED*) I suppose you think that was clever, hm? Just happening to find a washer on the ground?

FRED

I hope you don’t mean that I planted it there? Surely you don’t think I just carry washers about with me? I’m a milliner, what use would I have for washers?

SCROOGE

They are the fashion nowadays, are they not?

SCROOGE glares at FRED’S elaborate-if-shoddy Christmas outfit, which does indeed have some washers artistically affixed to it.

RATCHET

At any rate, sir, there’s one-hundred-forty-four washers. No loss, then... yes?

Another pause.

SCROOGE

Yes. No loss. Back to work.

RATCHET

Of course, Sir. Thank you, Fred. Merry Christmas.

*RATCHET dashes off. SCROOGE takes half-a-step after RATCHET, no doubt to admonish her over something, but bumps his foot against FRED'S **parcel**, which has been left on the ground.*

SCROOGE

(with barely restrained contempt) What is that?

FRED

A present, Uncle Scrooge! For you!

*FRED, fumbling with his **lantern**, lifts up the **parcel** and holds it out to SCROOGE. SCROOGE stares, then returns to his inventory.*

SCROOGE

Coil springs... we'll need more coil springs...

FRED

Oh please open it, Uncle. I took great pains to find something even *you* would enjoy.

SCROOGE

I am skeptical.

FRED

Well here it is!

*FRED, again fumbling with the **lantern**, opens his **parcel** to reveal a modest **portrait** of Nikola Tesla.*

FRED

Tah dah! Nikola Tesla! The father of our modern age. The paragon of scientists and engineers alike, the idol of the steampunk era! And in a modest, efficiently-sized portraiture. I knew you'd like that part.

SCROOGE

(offers a sidelong glance) And what am I to do with that?

FRED

Why, set it on your desk.

SCROOGE

Where I keep my typewriters, and my boxers, and my flange tighteners, pens, and papers?

FRED

Well, hang it on your wall, then.

SCROOGE

Where? In place of the shelves? The boilers? The de-rusting units?

FRED

Uncle Scrooge—

SCROOGE

The window perhaps. That *is* a waste of space.

FRED

The window?

SCROOGE

I've often thought of boarding it up, installing an electric chicken: it manufactures and cooks your eggs for you. Then I can stop wasting precious time eating breakfast at home. Thank you for the idea, Fred.

FRED

You can't be serious!

SCROOGE

No! ... No, of course not. It was *my* idea, wasn't it. Thank you for nothing, Fred. Good day.

FRED

Yes... of course. Well, Uncle, won't you join us for Christmas tomorrow?

SCROOGE

When?

FRED

Well, tomorrow. The whole day. You're welcome anytime.

SCROOGE

The whole day!?! Wasted on more frivolous nonsense like this? (*indicates the portrait*) Hm?

FRED

Uncle, surely you don't think Tesla to be nonsense?

SCROOGE

On the contrary: I give Nikola Tesla the respect he deserves. I emulate him. He dedicated his life to work.

FRED

So that others wouldn't have to.

SCROOGE

Bah! Humbug! Advancing mankind is the only thing worth doing.

K2 and the ENGINEER suddenly burst in. They are wearing top hats and playing characters in the story, but are obviously still themselves.

ENGINEER

Couldn't agree more, eh K2?

K2

From the mouths of babes, Engineer, from the mouths of babes. ... Though in this case, a babe of rather advanced years. Mister Scrooge, I presume?

SCROOGE

Yes? What do you want?

K2

As you well know, Sir, it is Christmas time—

SCROOGE

Yes! I *do* know; indeed I have no choice in the matter, as I have been tirelessly informed and re-informed on the issue again and again. Am I to lose an entire day's labor to this... (*with disgust*) festivity?

ENGINEER

Beg pardon, Mister Scrooge—

SCROOGE

I will not pardon it. It is an unconscionable waste! Now, what do you want? What is your business?

K2

Well Sir, we are collecting for the West End housing project.

FRED

Wonderful!

SCROOGE

What is that?

ENGINEER

It is a noble endeavor, to refurbish and rebuild the dilapidated West End, and create affordable housing for the less fortunate.

K2

The building-bots are ready to go: we merely lack the materials to begin construction.

ENGINEER

Hence our collection. How much can we put you down for?

SCROOGE

Nothing.

ENGINEER

You wish to be left anonymous?

SCROOGE

I wish to be left alone. You expect me to pay for the housing of idle indigents whom I have never met? I'd rather pay to house the building-bots. They are at least doing something useful.

ENGINEER

But sir, the homeless, they cannot be left out in the cold.

SCROOGE

They are welcome to seek employment any time.

K2

There are no jobs, Sir.

ENGINEER

None that pay enough to live on, certainly.

SCROOGE

Then let them go to the shelters.

K2

The shelters are full.

SCROOGE

The workhouses, then.

ENGINEER

They don't even pay enough to eat, Sir.

SCROOGE

Are there no more prisons?

K2

Many would rather die—

SCROOGE

Then they are welcome to hurry up and do so! And decrease the surplus population!
... Beg, work, live, die, it is no concern of mine, so long as they leave me to do my
work alone! Good day sirs!

*There is a terrible silence. For just a moment, SCROOGE looks like he might repent, but then he storms off into the other room. The three stare at each other; even FRED could not expect this level of heartlessness. After a moment, FRED starts singing a Christmas Carol; K2 and the ENGINEER join in. Night falls as the three start to exit, FRED still carrying the **portrait** and its discarded wrappings. K2 remains in a corner, still as a statue.*

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