

A Visit from Cousin Charles

by

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The night should have been dark and dreary, with brooding clouds and a gloomy feel to it. After all, that is the appropriate weather for a visit from a ghost.

Instead, it was a quiet Christmas eve. The sky was clear, the stars out, and the temperature typically Canadian, which is to say, cold.

My fiancé was tucked up in bed with visions of something dancing in her head (she always did have vivid dreams). She had retired earlier, as she usually did and I, the night owl, sat up with my pen and paper, searching for words I had misplaced earlier.

I was sprawled across our chesterfield, which is really a loveseat, blanket over my legs and sweater on top to keep me warm. The words I was searching for—for a play, I think—were not to be found, and I was contemplating the TV remote as an escape medium when someone standing in the kitchen doorway cleared his throat.

Now, our apartment is small. From the couch you can see straight into the kitchen. You can also see, depending on where you are looking, the front hall, a bit of the bathroom, the dining area, the office area, the balcony, and the rather impressive view of the apartment tower next door. The point of all this is that no one could have gotten into the kitchen without my noticing, especially not a man wearing a black Victorian suit and cape, topped with a top-hat and carrying a walking stick in one hand and a rather thick book in the other. Yet, between the scribbling down and the scratching out of a line, there he was.

I stared at him, dumbfounded and frightened. He looked back calmly. This lasted for some time until it became apparent to him that I was stuck in place like an ant in honey.

“May I sit down?” he asked. He had to repeat it three times. On the last, I managed to stutter out, “Of ... of course.”

He sat, keeping the hat on his head, the stick in his hand, and his back ramrod straight. The look he was giving me was not one of happiness. “Well,” he said. “This is a fine mess, isn’t it?”

I managed to get my thoughts together enough to blurt, "Who the hell are you?"

He looked offended. "That is no way to speak to a relative."

Relative? I looked closer. The book he was carrying was thick and bound in green leather. The writing on the front was gold. My eyes strayed to the bookshelf behind him, where a very similar book should be resting. It wasn't. I stated the obvious. "That's mine."

"And mine," he agreed.

I was about to protest his automatic assumption of my willingness to share when my brain, which to this point had been cowering somewhere deep in the back of my skull, decided at last to step forward and join us. The world snapped into a much sharper focus.

"Charles Dickens," I surmised. "My cousin."

"Seven times removed," he agreed. He held up the book, which was, of course, his collected works. "I must say I'm disappointed to see that this has hardly been read."

"*That* is a gift edition," I said. "The writing is too small and the book too large to make reading at all pleasant. Look at the other shelves."

I waved to the rather messy bookshelves that flanked the television. On one sat *A Tale of Two Cities*. On another *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*. On a third were his Christmas Books, that did not even appear in the volume he was holding. He looked over the shelves, spotted his work, then examined the rest of the collection. "What an awful lot of silliness you read," he said, looking pointedly at the large Science Fiction and Fantasy sections. "Pity. I had hopes for you."

"Why does everyone look down at my genre?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Your genre?"

"I've written two fantasy books," I said.

"And published neither," he reminded me. "An unpublished writer is a waste of earning potential."

"So my mother tells me."

"Did she also tell you it was polite to offer relatives a drink when they visit?"

I got up. "I don't have much to offer," I said. "I only keep a little whiskey."

"That will be sufficient."

I skirted around him into the kitchen for glasses, then around him again to reach the shelf where the bottle of Jamieson's was sitting. I poured him us both a measure, then handed him the glass. He inhaled deeply of the aroma, then took a mouthful. I watched him roll it around, then swallow. He relaxed visibly, then, his posture no longer ramrod straight. He took his hat off and set it on the table, then took another mouthful. I sat on the couch again.

"Charles," I ventured, "What are you doing here?"

He looked offended. "Why shouldn't I be here? Christmas eve is a traditional time for visiting one's relatives."

"True," I agreed, "though one usually phones first."

"There are no phones in heaven."

"And one is usually alive."

"Is that what is bothering you?" he asked, sounding surprised. "And you a reader of Peter Straub."

"Nothing good comes of ghosts in Peter Straub," I reminded him. A thought struck me. "You're not here to play the Ghost of Christmas past, are you?"

"Certainly not! A good writer never repeats himself."

"My apologies."

"I am here," he said, "to warn you."

"Oh," I thought about that. "More of a Marley's ghost thing, then."

He opened his mouth to protest, realized I was right and shut it again.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Afterlife usually imitates art these days."

His eyes narrowed. "One more like that and I will leave without telling you anything."

"I'm sorry," I said, not meaning it at all.

His eyes narrowed further. "Heaven is very nice this time of year, you know. We have a very large party."

"Birthday bash?"

He ignored me. "The great writers of history are having story contests," he said. "I'm supposed to be competing with Robertson Davies in the Christmas Ghost Story category. Instead, I am sitting here, talking to you."

“My apologies,” I said. “Please, tell me.”

“I’m not sure I should. With humour like that, you may just deserve your fate.”

“If my fate was so dire as to bring you back from the dead to warn me, I don’t think anyone deserves it.”

He had the last of his whiskey. I immediately filled it again. He took another drink, thought about it for a while, and relented. “Very well,” he said. “The warning is, publish or perish.”

He took another mouthful of whiskey and sat back, looking at me calmly.

“I take it you don’t mean in the academic sense,” I ventured.

“You not being an academic, no.”

“I have to publish or I will die.”

“Yes.” He thought about it. “well, no.”

“I won’t die?”

“Of course you will. Everybody dies.”

“But that’s not what the warning is about.”

“No.”

“Then?”

“You will go to Hell.”

A chill crept up my spine. I was afraid again, if only because he sounded so calm when he said it. “For not getting published?” I asked “Isn’t that a bit harsh?”

“Not considering what you will do instead.” He took another drink, and leaned back in his chair. “Do you know of the book of God?”

“The Bible?”

“No, no,” he waved a hand dismissively. “The book God actually wrote.”

“The Koran?”

“Are you planning to listen? Because Robertson is waiting, if you aren’t.”

“Sorry,” I said. “God’s an author.”

“Of course. What else would he be?” He took another drink. “God has a book that lists everything that could possibly happen.”

“And he let you read it?”

“Anyone who’s dead can read it,” Charles said. “It’s the living who aren’t supposed to know.”

“And in this book, I’ll go to hell if I don’t get published?”

“And considering what you’ll become, rightly so.”

I was now truly creeped out. “And what will I become?”

He leaned in close and whispered words into my ear that sent a wave of fear through me. He stood up. “You understand, now?”

I nodded, dumbfounded.

“And?”

“I’ll get published,” I whispered. “Come Hell or high water, I will get published.”

He put down my copy of his works, and stretched out his hand for a shake. I took it. His grip was quite strong, for a dead man’s. “Be sure that you do,” he said. “Because while the latter may not come, the former certainly will.”

He vanished. One moment he was there, the next he wasn’t and my hand was clasp empty air. I took a deep breath, remembered my whiskey, and finished it in a gulp. The heat of it burned through me, giving me enough life to stand up.

The book on the table flapped open, the pages waving as though a strong wind was blowing through them, though no air moved in the apartment. It settled a moment later, open to the frontispiece. There, Charles signature was now written, with the single word. “Remember.”

I put down the empty glass and went back to my scribbling. The words that didn’t want to come before were even more recalcitrant. I kept at it, anyway. Every time I was tempted to put the pen away, I remembered Charles’s whispered words, and shudders of fear went through me.

I mean, an eternity in hell would be bad.

But to be a critic?