

# The Naming of the Scrooge

A Play by

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CHARLES DICKENS.....England's favorite novelist  
 THE GHOST OF DICKENS' PAST.....the first messenger  
 THE GHOST OF DICKENS' PRESENT.....the second messenger  
 THE GHOST OF DICKENS' YET TO COME.....the final messenger  
 CHORUS.....narrator, a miscellany of characters

TIME: February, 1843.

PLACE: Dickens' home in London, England; specifically his study  
 / bedroom.

SETTING: To stage right is a rather ornate four-post canopy bed, with bedside tables on either side. A stack of books clutters the bedside table closest to the audience. Stage left is Dickens' writing desk and chair. On it are placed a ream of writing paper, a quill pen and bottle of ink, a large candle, another stack of books, and the day's newspaper. Behind the desk to the left is a nearly-full bookcase. The 6-8 foot area along the front edge of the stage is empty. This area is the "void" reserved for the onstage action taking place within Dickens' subconscious. Lighting within the bedroom indicates evening, accentuated with candlelight. When the action shifts from reality to the dream-world, the bedroom fades into the darkness, and the action at the foot of the stage takes place with spotlighting from above.

## The Naming of the Scrooge

[The stage is dark. From above, a spotlight shines on CHORUS, dressed in black pants and black, long-sleeved shirt.]

### CHORUS

The London Times, February sixth, 1843. Section B, page four. Book critic Robert Cratchit reviews Martin Chuzzlewit, by Charles Dickens. "Working men and women must daily endure their share of trials and hardships, from the factories to their homes. These fine citizens struggle to make ends meet, and seldom have income to spare. Yet without fail, they come forth in droves--money in hand--to purchase any new offering from author Charles Dickens. To date, Mr. Dickens' readers have made him vastly successful, hence widening the economic gap between author and audience. The Old Curiosity Shop, extraordinarily popular with the masses, kept readers in rapt suspense as they awaited the fate of Little Nell. However, after reading Mr. Dickens' most recent contribution, Martin Chuzzlewit, it seems the magic may be gone. It is a sad book, in every sense of the word. Mr. Dickens will have to do much better than this if he is to maintain his status as the people's favorite. This time around, I would implore the reading public to spare themselves the disappointment and pick up the latest from Mr. Ainsworth or Mr. Bulwer."

[Spotlight fades, engulfing CHORUS in darkness. Stage lights rise to reveal DICKENS, pacing fretfully around his bedroom/study, wearing a Victorian-era nightshirt and cap. He smokes a pipe, not calmly, as pipes should be smoked, but rather hastily and nervously. Writing materials and a burning candle occupy his desk. After a moment of pacing, he sits down, takes his pen and a fresh sheet of paper, puts the pen to the paper as if to begin writing, but nothing comes. He appears frozen, unable to write. A moment later, slams his pen

down, stands back up, and resumes pacing.]

DICKENS

[Angry.]

Blast! Blast this bloody business, blast it all! [*With anxiety*] Oh, what am I to do? Oh dear...

[He picks up a newspaper from the desk, already open and folded to what is apparently the page of the aforementioned review. He stares at it for a moment in disgust.]

What a fantastic piece of journalism! [*Reading*] "...widening the economic gap...magic may be gone..." Bah! Literary critics should all be boiled in their own pudding.

[He replaces the newspaper on the desk. Reconsidering, he picks it back up, wads it up and tosses it on the desk.]

[Incensed.]

I pour my life--my self--into my work! Stories, for the people. In the pages of my books, they may escape from their harsh realities, and become lost in the world of Little Nell or Oliver Twist. The nerve! The audacity! I will surprise them all. [*Determined*] My next novel will be a sensation. It will be read the world over. It will change everything--the very course of humanity! [*Pause, realizing*] I must set about writing it.

[Again, he sits at the desk and prepares to write, looks up, stares blankly. Inspired, he scrawls a few words, stops, studies them, then scratches them out. He rises and resumes pacing.]

[Timidly.]

What if I am washed out? My well of ideas run dry? [*Pause. With resolve.*] I need a character. A fantastic character. With a fantastic name. Let me see...[*Long pause.*] Motworth? No, no...um, Dravel, Dragmire, Drood?...no, no, Drood? Good

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[CONTINUED]

heavens, no...Scroob?... Scrooge? Scrooge? Yes, Scrooge! What a fantastic name, Scrooge! [*Pause, pondering.*] Ezekiel Scrooge. [*Excited*] By far the best character I have ever invented! He will be a rich man, cold and greedy--a miser. Unloved and unloving. But in the end, he will change! He will become charity incarnate. And he will love all men, and he will be loved by all men. He will be their hero, and they will adore him and forget his wicked past! [*Satisfied*] Charles, old boy, you're back on top.

[He yawns, implying the late hour. Once again, he sits down at his desk to write.]

[Aloud, as he writes.]

"Ezekiel Scrooge." Yes, this will be magnificent. I shall begin his story tomorrow. If I am diligent, I'll be finished in time for a Christmas release! Yes, tomorrow--tomorrow? What is tomorrow? Something important--? [*Pause, groaning.*] Oh, my mind is weary from anxiety. A good night's rest will put this day-- and [*regarding the wadded-up newspaper*] this particular critic-- behind me.

[DICKENS puts his writing materials in order, takes the candle from his desk and places it on his bedside table. He turns back the covers and sits on the edge of the bed. He is struck with an idea.]

A ghost story? [*Considers.*] I've never written a ghost story. Perhaps Scrooge's story...? But no, quite a silly thought, brought on by stress and exhaustion, no doubt. No, no, I'll begin Scrooge's story tomorrow, with a mind renewed with the coming day.

[He lies down, pulls the covers over him. A wind blows. He notices the candle, still burning, on his bedside table.]

Ah, the candle--

[Before he can do so, the candle is mysteriously extinguished. DICKENS is startled.]

DICKENS

What on earth--?

[He nervously scans the room. Out of the shadows stage left appears THE GHOST OF DICKENS' PAST. He is dressed in a gray robe, similar to that of a medieval monk or friar. His face and hair are white. He approaches Dickens' bed and stands at the footboard. His tone is somber and reflective.]

PAST

[Softly.]

Charles.

[DICKENS is not aware of the physical presence in the room.]

Charles Dickens.

[DICKENS sits up. He takes a matchbox from the bedside table, strikes a match and re-lights the candle, still not noticing the figure at the foot of the bed.]

DICKENS

[Tentatively.]

Did someone call? [*Pause.*] Hello? [*Pause, louder*] Catherine, did you call?

PAST

[Louder.]

Charles.

DICKENS

[Fearful.]

What is this? Who is calling? [*Pause.*] Catherine, d-darling--

[As PAST speaks, it is as if he materializes before DICKENS' fear-stricken eyes.]

PAST

Charles, we haven't much time, and our business is important. Please, get up.

DICKENS

Who are you? [*To himself*] I must be dreaming--

PAST

I am simply a messenger, come to bear witness to times gone by.

DICKENS

Messenger? Sent by whom?

PAST

I will impose upon you but for a brief time. The journey we will take together, you know by heart.

DICKENS

I don't understand. I am unprepared for a journey.

PAST

No one is ever prepared for an excursion into the past.

DICKENS

What past?

PAST

You should ask, "Whose past?"

DICKENS

Whose past, then?

PAST

Yours, Charles. Your life...your past.

DICKENS

[*Nervously.*]

What is the purpose of this?

PAST

The importance of our time together will become clear. Have patience.

[PAST motions for DICKENS to rise and join him. DICKENS gets out of bed and approaches PAST. They walk stage right as the lights fade on the bedroom. In the spotlight, downstage, they seem isolated, as if in a void.]

DICKENS  
[Annoyed.]

What is the meaning of this? I do not appreciate being forced out of bed at such an hour.

PAST  
I only want to talk to you, Charles.

DICKENS  
Talk to me? I don't believe I even know you!

PAST  
Our acquaintance is of no importance. My desire is to talk to you about your life. Do you object?

DICKENS  
Are you a reporter?

PAST  
Far from it.

DICKENS  
[Pause.]  
Good. Well then, I suppose I could spare a few moments to indulge your curiosity.

PAST  
Thank you. [Pause.] Your childhood had a great impact on you, Charles. Yet you strive to forget it, to put it behind you. Why?

DICKENS  
My childhood?...good heavens. It wasn't exactly idyllic.

PAST  
Wasn't it? Do tell.

DICKENS  
As my father's son--

[As DICKENS utters the word "father," a spotlight illuminates the CHORUS, stage left, dressed as before, representing John Dickens, Charles's father. DICKENS recognizes his father, dumbstruck.]

DICKENS

--Fa-Father?

CHORUS [*as John Dickens*]  
[Jovially.]

Look at Charley! He's such a smart boy! [*To DICKENS*] Charley, do your little Hamlet speech for our guests...go on. [*To audience*] The boy is sharp as a tack, I say. And readin' Shakespeare at the age of nine--he'll be a fine actor someday. [*To DICKENS*] Go on, son. Out with it.

DICKENS

But father--

CHORUS [*as John Dickens*]

Alright, a song, then. Sing us a funny one, Charley. We could all use a laugh.

DICKENS  
[Growing frustrated.]

Father, I do not exist to provide you and your guests with amusement. I am your son, might I remind you--not just a cheap source of entertainment.

CHORUS [*as John Dickens*]  
[*To audience.*]

He's a wee bit shy, the boy. You must forgive me. [*To DICKENS*] Charley, why must you embarrass me? What have I done, for you to despise me so?

[Blackout on CHORUS. DICKENS is reflectively silent.]

PAST

Did you despise your "prodigal father," Charles?

DICKENS

[Thoughtful.]

I don't know...a bit...yes, I suppose I did. I suppose I loved him and hated him. He was my father, but--oh, all that I was forced to endure on account of him! The embarrassment he brought on the family, being thrown into debtors' prison....And I, a child, was expected to support the family and pay off his creditors by going to work.

PAST

You resented being sent off to work at such a young age?

DICKENS

It was the nearest thing to hell I have ever known. The coarseness of the whole thing--the work, the rooms, the boys, the language--it was a bestial nightmare. I worked drearily, in stunned disappointment. I was miserable at the receptive age when children should be happy.

PAST

Yet you grew into a writer who seemed to be happy when all men found cause to weep.

DICKENS

Perhaps--but I have only achieved that peaceful state by leaving those days behind, forgotten. I'd rather not speak of them.

PAST

As you wish, Charles. [Beat] Your story does, of course, improve. Your father was liberated from prison, and you were liberated from the blacking factory.

DICKENS

By God's grace.

PAST

And was it not your father who insisted that you attend school?

[Spotlight on CHORUS as John Dickens.]

CHORUS [as John Dickens]

[With resolve.]

The boy is miserable. The boy is clever. The boy must go to school.

[Blackout on CHORUS.]

DICKENS

Yes, this much is true. Wellington House Academy was a welcome departure from factory work. It seems I was given my boyhood after my youth.

PAST

Rather than going from school into the world, you went from the world into school. And after school, you found your life's work--you began writing. [Pause] Do you remember your twenty-third birthday, Charles? The year was 1835.

DICKENS

Ah, yes...I threw myself a spectacular party. We danced...my mother and sisters were there--my sister Fanny entertained us with her singing--

PAST

There was one guest who especially enjoyed your party, and took a particular liking to the host.

DICKENS

[Remembering.]

Catherine...

[As DICKENS says her name, spotlight on CHORUS, smiling, representing twenty-year-old Catherine Hogarth.]

CHORUS [*as Catherine*]

[To audience, but as if to DICKENS.]

Pleased to meet you, Mr. Dickens. [*Curtsies. To herself.*] What a pleasant gentleman...

[Blackout on CHORUS.]

DICKENS

I suppose I was bound to marry her. The timing was right--I was ready to settle down with a wife, and we got along quite well.

PAST

So you were happy--

DICKENS

Oh, of course! I was proud of her, and proud of myself for  
*CONTINUED*

[CONTINUED]

having acquired that dignifying satellite, a wife. We were married in 1836. For those first years, Catherine's sister Mary lived with us.

[Upon the mention of Mary's name, spotlight on CHORUS, representing Mary Hogarth. DICKENS, noticing her, is visibly affected.]

CHORUS [*as Mary Hogarth*]  
[Excitedly, as if speaking to a friend.]

The newlyweds are absolutely precious! Catherine makes a splendid housekeeper and is as happy as the day is long--she has everything in this world to make her comfortable and happy. And Charles is kindness itself to her. I think they are more devoted than ever since their marriage, if that is possible.

DICKENS  
[Longingly.]

Mary? Oh my...

CHORUS [*as Mary Hogarth*]  
Charles' literary career gets more and more prosperous every day. He is courted on every side by all the great folks of the city.

[DICKENS reaches out his hand and begins to walk toward her, but she disappears as the spotlight goes dark. DICKENS halts, confused and troubled.]

PAST  
Of your early days of marriage, you once wrote, "I shall never be so happy again as I was in those days--never if I roll in wealth and fame."

DICKENS  
We were quite an inseparable bunch. [*Pause*] Those days seem so long ago.

PAST  
Much has happened since those days, Charles.

DICKENS

Indeed...much has changed.

[Poignant pause.]

PAST

Yet one event changed your life, and your marriage, more than anything else.

DICKENS

Whatever do you mean?

PAST

Mary's death was the kind of tragedy which tends to bring people together, yet it only drove a wedge between you and Catherine.

DICKENS

[Defensively.]

Mary's death was difficult for us all. A woman dying in your arms is not easily forgotten. I have been haunted by that memory for nearly six years--

PAST

Your affection for your young sister-in-law was quite out of the ordinary, wouldn't you say?

DICKENS

Are you implying--?

PAST

Could it be said that you've often wondered if perhaps, by some accident, you got hold of the wrong sister?

DICKENS

[Indignant.]

How dare you, sir, question my love for my wife and my intentions for her sister? What is your purpose in this interview? For whom are you working?

PAST

[Calmly.]

I work for you, Charles. [Pause] Unfortunately, our time has run out, and I must leave you. However, you mustn't forget our pilgrimage this evening. Soon, you will soon receive another guest. His purpose is similar to mine--and soon, it will all be clear. Goodbye, Charles. [Imploringly] And remember these things...please remember.

[PAST steps back into the darkness and exits, leaving DICKENS in the spotlight, alone and confused. He starts to call after his departed guide, but makes no sound but a sigh. He stands in silence for a moment. The spotlight follows him as he begins pacing to the left.]

DICKENS  
[Annoyed.]

What audacity, to make such an insinuation! This is preposterous. A most ridiculous dream. In all my years, I've never--

[A chilling breeze blows, causing DICKENS to halt in mid-sentence. He shudders. Spotlight on THE GHOST OF DICKENS' PRESENT, stage right. He wears the clothes of a Victorian gentleman, black suit with tails, black patent leather shoes with spats, a top hat, carrying a cane. His demeanor is jovial, as if DICKENS were an old chum.]

PRESENT

Charles, old boy! So good to see you.

[Spotlight follows PRESENT as he crosses the stage and joins DICKENS, stage left.]

DICKENS

I'm sorry, sir, but do I know you?

PRESENT

[Slapping him on the back.]

Oh, I wouldn't expect that you'd remember me, but I certainly know you--a man of your talent and popularity!

DICKENS

[Flattered.]

Why, thank you, sir. I am honored. And by what name are you known?

PRESENT

[Chuckles.]

Many people have called me many different things in my time. But for our exchange this evening, Charles, you may just call me Marley.

DICKENS

Just Marley?

PRESENT

No, Jacob Marley. But just for tonight.

DICKENS

Well, it is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Marley.

PRESENT

[Bowing gallantly.]

I assure you, Mr. Dickens, the pleasure is all mine.

DICKENS

It is always so good to meet one of my readers.

PRESENT

"Readers?" Oh, no, Mr. Dickens, I never read.

DICKENS

You mean you've never read my--

PRESENTS

--Your books? Oh, good heavens, no. Not a one.

DICKENS

Then whatever did you mean by referring to my talent? My popularity?

PRESENT

Why, everyone knows of your talent! You are quite famous! Surely you realize this, don't you, Charles?

DICKENS

Yes, of course, but--

PRESENT

Your novels are extraordinarily successful! Everyone reads them. *[Beat]* Just not me. But, really, I'm not much of a reader.

DICKENS

Mr. Marley, what is this all about? I cannot tell if your intent is to flatter, embarrass, or offend me.

PRESENT

My intent? An interesting query. *[Pause]* My intent is simple. I want to talk.

DICKENS

Alright, about what?

PRESENT

About life.

DICKENS

Whose life?

PRESENT

Your life, Mr. Dickens.

DICKENS

And what about my life, Mr. Marley, do you wish to talk about?

PRESENT

Where would you like to begin?

DICKENS

*[Slightly annoyed.]*

Let's begin with tonight. What exactly is happening to me? Why am I having this absurd dream?

PRESENT

Dream? Ah, you don't believe I exist?

DICKENS

I do not.

PRESENT

What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?

DICKENS

I don't know.

PRESENT

Why do you doubt your senses?

DICKENS

Because every little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them dishonest. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a fragment of an underdone potato!

PRESENT

I assure you, Mr. Dickens, I am none of those things. I am a messenger, and I have come only to deliver you a message.

DICKENS

I've already had my share of visitors this evening. If it is all the same to you, Mr. Marley, I'd much rather return to my bed. I have a novel to begin tomorrow.

PRESENT

A new novel--oh, how exciting! And what of your most recent book? Let's see, what is the title? "Marvin Chucklenit" or something. Has it been favorably received?

DICKENS

[Perturbed, over-enunciating.]

Martin Chuzzlewit. [*Softening*] No. No, it has been a relative failure.

PRESENT

Come now, old boy! You'll swing back.

DICKENS

But I am afraid I will not. It seems I am not the writer I used to be.

PRESENT

Now, surely you exaggerate. You're in a bit of a slump. Why is that? There must be a reason.

DICKENS

I suppose I am a bit dissatisfied. Depressed, perhaps.

PRESENT

What could a man of your prominence possibly have to be depressed about?

DICKENS

Oh...I wouldn't know where to begin.

PRESENT

How about your family? How is life at the Dickens household?

DICKENS

[Offended.]

My personal affairs are none of your concern.

PRESENT

[Raising his voice.]

Mr. Dickens, you are my concern! [Pause.] Now, shall we try again? How is life at home?

DICKENS

Much has changed in these--good heavens--nearly seven years?

PRESENT

It seems so. You have four children now.

DICKENS

Yes, four little ones. I do hope we're about through.

PRESENT

Having children?

DICKENS

Yes, I am afraid my income cannot tolerate many more dependents.

PRESENT

Come now. With your ever-growing success?

DICKENS

It shouldn't be so. However, I have more than my wife and four children to provide for.

PRESENT

Is that so?

DICKENS

Indeed it is! I have such a financial burden! Not only am I responsible for my own household, but for my parents and brothers as well. They seem to see my success as something to be plucked from and torn to pieces for their advantage. And my father--

[As before, upon the mention of "father," spotlight rises on CHORUS, representing John Dickens. DICKENS regards him and continues.]

DICKENS

--nothing I do ever satisfies him!

CHORUS [*as John Dickens*]

Excuse me, Mr. Hall? Oh, Mr. Chapman--terribly sorry. I believe you are in charge of publishing my son's books? Charles Dickens? Yes, well, I wonder if you'd be obliged to extend to me a loan against my son's earnings? It seems I have some creditors--

DICKENS

[Interrupting.]

Father, I will not continue to pay off your debts! I believe you quite deserved your stint in debtors' prison! I do wish they'd come for you again.

CHORUS [*as John Dickens*]

[Embarrassed.]

Oh, Charles, my boy. I was just chatting with your publisher, Mr. Chapman.

DICKENS

Mr. Chapman is no longer my publisher. And I do hope you'll not impose upon my new publishers for advances upon my income!

CHORUS [*as John Dickens*]

I'm sorry, Charles. I didn't mean--

DICKENS

[Angry.]

You leech! Will you ever stop?

[Pause.]

CHORUS [*as John Dickens*]

[Broken.]

But Charles, I'm bankrupt--

DICKENS

[Shouting.]

As a father, you were bankrupt!

[Blackout on CHORUS. Pause.]

DICKENS

[Exasperated.]

I only want to provide for my family the kind of life that I was never afforded! The father should provide for his family; the mother should tend to the house; the children should have no more responsibility than to revel in the joys of childhood!

PRESENT

I understand, Charles. Life seems to be giving you quite a good kick in the shins these days. But your marriage must bring you some satisfaction.

DICKENS

On the contrary! Catherine seems to grow more dull by the moment. [*Afterthought, "tongue-in-cheek"*] In fact, she seems to grow in size by the moment.

PRESENT

It seems unfair that you, one of the most successful novelists in England, should be denied the kind of emotional intensity in your life which you project so well in your art. You must wonder if you'll ever be afforded romantic excitement again!

DICKENS

It doesn't matter. [*Pause*] It seems my life no longer matters.

[Pause.]

PRESENT

I wish I could tell you that things will improve. [*Pause*] The days ahead may be more troubled than you can imagine. Your life is a series of choices, Mr. Dickens, and you are the only one who can make them. You must begin taking responsibility for yourself. [*Pause*] I must leave you now.

DICKENS

No, wait! Tell me what I must do. What choices must I make? How will I know what to choose?

PRESENT

Those are questions which I cannot answer, Charles.

DICKENS

What will happen now?

PRESENT

You will receive one more guest this evening. I am sure that many of your questions will be answered soon enough.

DICKENS

Mr. Marley, please don't go. I--

PRESENT

I have accomplished what I came to do. Now my time is up. Farewell, Mr. Dickens.

[PRESENT bows, doffing his hat, steps back into the shadows, and exits.]

DICKENS

[Anxiously.]

Mr. Marley--please come back. I would like to talk some more. About my life...about anything...about Catherine...

[Pause. Spotlight on CHORUS, stage right, representing Catherine Dickens.]

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

Charles, I'm pregnant.

DICKENS

[Astonished.]

What? Again?

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]  
[Sarcastically.]

Darling, please--your excitement is more than I can bear.

DICKENS

I'm sorry, dear. This news comes as such a surprise to me.

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

It's a surprise to me, too. I'm out of my wits with worry!

DICKENS

Why are you frightened?

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

Childbirth has taken quite a toll on me. And with each birth, with each added pound, your interest in me wanes all the more.

DICKENS

Catherine, I'm sorry. I just--

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

You do realize your responsibility in this matter, don't you?  
It is not as if I became pregnant all by myself.

DICKENS

Yes, of course, I wasn't blaming you. I know--

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

No, you don't know. And it seems you don't care. [*Pause*] It  
seems you've given up.

[Blackout on CHORUS.]

DICKENS

[*Frantically.*]

Catherine! Catherine, wait--we must talk about this! We must  
confront this issue. [*Pause*] Catherine! [*Pause. In disbelief.*]  
Oh, my...another child. Another mouth to feed. How long will  
this go on?

[Spotlight on CHORUS,  
representing a young girl, a fan  
of Dickens' work, pen in one hand,  
book in the other. CHORUS  
approaches DICKENS timidly.]

CHORUS [*as girl.*]

Mr. Dickens, sir...

DICKENS

[*Annoyed.*]

What is it?

CHORUS [*as girl.*]

Would you be so kind as to...as to autograph this copy of The  
Old Curiosity Shop?

[DICKENS' face brightens.]

It is for my brother. He's sick in bed right now, and I thought  
this might cheer him up. We are both so fond of Little Nell.

DICKENS

Why of course! Far be it from me to neglect a reader!

[DICKENS takes the pen and book.]

And what is your brother's name?

CHORUS [*as girl.*]

His name is Timothy, sir. Tim, as we call him.

[DICKENS signs the book.]

CHORUS

Thank you so much, Mr. Dickens.

DICKENS

Why of course! It is never any trouble! Now, is Tim your older brother, or younger?

CHORUS [*as girl.*]

My younger brother, sir. He's quite small for his age.

DICKENS

Oh, that won't last, I'm sure. Please tell young Tim I hope he feels better soon.

[DICKENS hands the book back to CHORUS.]

CHORUS [*as girl.*]

I will tell him, sir. And thank you very much.

[Blackout on CHORUS.]

DICKENS

[Refreshed.]

I do love my readers so. [*Pause*] Sometimes it seems as if I have a more gratifying relationship with my audience than with my wife--

[DICKENS' train of thought is broken as spotlight rises on CHORUS, representing Catherine Dickens. She stares into space, never looking at DICKENS.]

DICKENS

Catherine! I didn't hear you approach. You should really be in bed. It is quite late, dear.

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]  
[Hurt, angrier than before.]

In bed...on the other side of the wall? You wouldn't know if I was in bed or not. I could die in my sleep in that room, and you'd be none the wiser.

DICKENS

What are you talking about? What wall--?

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

You can build a wall between us, Charles--make us prisoners in our own home--but we are still man and wife. And that requires more than your occasional conjugal visits.

DICKENS

But I never--I don't understand.

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

I received an interesting package this week. It was a bracelet. At first, I was overjoyed that you had taken such an effort to buy me a gift. Until I saw that it was engraved with the name "Ellen."

DICKENS

[Confused.]

What? Who is Ellen?

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

How could you do this to me, Charles? Was it an accident, or did you intend for me to discover your unfaithfulness!

DICKENS

I can't imagine what--

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

And don't tell me that you buy jewelry for all of your young actresses! Just how many have there been, Charles?

DICKENS

Your jealous imagination is proof of your insanity, Catherine. I have no idea what you are referring to!

[Tense silence.]

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]  
[Softer.]

My family wants me to leave you, Charles.

DICKENS  
[Imploringly.]

Catherine, please--

CHORUS [*as Catherine Dickens*]

I have thought it over, and I think perhaps separation is the best solution. I can't take anymore of your cruelty, nor anymore public humiliation.

DICKENS  
[Baffled.]

I had no idea you were so unhappy--

[Blackout on CHORUS.]

Catherine! No, we must--Catherine, there must be another solution! [Pause] How could she make such a suggestion? I have been as faithful to her as I have to my work. Anyone who knows me would vouch for that--

[Spotlight on CHORUS,  
representing William Thackeray.]

DICKENS

Mr. Thackeray! So good to see you! William, will you please talk to my wife--?

CHORUS [*as Thackeray.*]  
[To audience.]

What? Mr. Dickens having an affair with his sister-in-law? Georgina? Oh, good heavens, no such thing! It's with an actress!

DICKENS  
[Infuriated.]

William! What could you possibly gain from disgracing me in public like this? Such slander--

CHORUS [*as Thackeray.*]  
[To DICKENS.]

"Slander?" Well, then it is certainly the lesser of two slanders, and closer to the truth!

DICKENS

Mr. Thackeray, if you insist on humiliating me, perhaps it would be best to sever our association--

[Blackout on CHORUS. DICKENS stands in befuddled silence. A breeze blows. GHOST OF DICKENS YET TO COME silently enters the spotlight with DICKENS.]

DICKENS

Who are you?

YET TO COME

[reciting Dickens' words]

"I believe my marriage has been for years and years as miserable a one as ever was made. I believe that no two people were ever created with such an impossibility of interest, sympathy, confidence, sentiment, tender union of any kind between them as there is between my wife and me." [Pause] These are your words, Charles.

DICKENS

How can you call words mine which have never crossed my lips?

YET TO COME

"Mrs. Dickens and I have lived unhappily together for many years. Hardly anyone who has known us intimately can fail to have known that we are in all respects of character and temperament wonderfully unsuited to each other. I suppose that no two people, not vicious in themselves, ever were joined together who had a greater difficulty understanding one another, or who had less in common. Our recent separation is certainly a result of a mental disorder under which Mrs. Dickens sometimes labors. The suggestion that some impropriety with Ms. Ellen Ternan was the cause is unheard of--there is not on this earth a more virtuous and spotless creature than that young lady. I know her to be innocent and pure, and as good as my own dear daughters." [Pause] These, too, are your words, Charles.

DICKENS

They most certainly are not my words. I don't understand.

YET TO COME

These are words you have not yet spoken--but you shall.

DICKENS

And how do you know this?

YET TO COME

I am simply a messenger.

DICKENS

One which claims knowledge of the future?

YET TO COME

I have knowledge of things which have not yet taken place.

DICKENS

Oh, I see! [*Irritated.*] This is perhaps the best story I've heard all night.

YET TO COME

You doubt me just as you doubted my colleagues.

DICKENS

Of course I do! No one can know the future save God the Father, and unless you claim to be Him, sir, I shall continue to doubt your authenticity.

YET TO COME

Charles, if you doubt our authenticity, the time you have spent with us this evening will have been wasted.

DICKENS

[*Annoyed.*]

This has all been a waste of time--time that I should like to have spent sleeping! Tomorrow is an important day! I have a novel to write!

YET TO COME

So you do not wish to know how your story ends?

DICKENS

No! I would prefer to write it myself!

YET TO COME

No, Charles. *Your* story--the story of your life.

DICKENS

You cannot know the chapters of my life which have not yet been written. It is impossible!

Nothing is impossible. YET TO COME

Fine! Tell me about my life. DICKENS

What would you like to know? YET TO COME

Is Catherine pregnant? DICKENS

Right now, this very moment? YET TO COME

Yes, right now. February sixth, 1843. DICKENS

No, she is not. But by this time next year, you will have another mouth to feed. YET TO COME

Another child? DICKENS  
[Horrorified.]

Yes, another child. YET TO COME

Will he be the last one? DICKENS

Five more will follow--ten in all. YET TO COME

God help me! DICKENS  
[Overwhelmed.]

God help Catherine. For she will endure more suffering than childbirth alone. YET TO COME

What do you mean! Tell me! DICKENS

YET TO COME

You will leave her.

DICKENS

But it was she who spoke of leaving me!

YET TO COME

Yes, she will be the one to suggest the separation. But you will begin to leave her first. In degrees--not all at once.

DICKENS

But I have no desire to leave her.

YET TO COME

But you will, nonetheless. Your separation, and your alleged infidelity, will be rather public--the subject of much gossip. Your reputation will suffer a good deal. At the same time, you will become increasingly obsessed with your audience. Your feeling of obligation to them will become more than you can accommodate.

DICKENS

A celebrity owes a great deal to his public. A life of fame is not easy.

YET TO COME

Certainly not, but this you will bring upon yourself. You will take on an incomprehensible schedule of public performances, in addition to your writing.

DICKENS

But my fame will continue? I am not washed-out?

YET TO COME

Your fame will increase. Your novels will be immensely popular. Your name will be known in every household. A century from now, your stories will still be read and respected. The characters you create will live on. You will be considered one of the greatest writers in history.

DICKENS

[Awe-struck.]

My goodness...this is pleasant news indeed! I was afraid you had nothing but the bad to offer.

YET TO COME

But your life cannot go on forever, Charles.

DICKENS

No, of course not. It is appointed for a man once to die.

YET TO COME

Do you wish to know about your death? [Silence.] It will be brought on by the choices you make.

DICKENS

Do you mean that I will bring about my own death?

YET TO COME

Do you want to know how the story ends?

DICKENS

Yes! I have read the first two volumes--I am awaiting the third. What is to come? Tell me! How does it end?

YET TO COME

Catherine's story ends unhappily. She will die, miserable and alone. [Pause] But your story will come to an end before hers.

[Low, blue lighting rises, revealing Dickens' bedroom. DICKENS and YET TO COME begin to move upstage.]

DICKENS

My room...my bed. We've returned.

YET TO COME

You spend a great deal of time at that desk, don't you?

DICKENS

Yes, I'd say so.

YET TO COME

[Regarding the stack of books.]

And these books--what are they?

DICKENS

Oh, some of mine--some others that I enjoy...

YET TO COME

Are they? Tell me, which ones?

[DICKENS picks up a few from the top of the stack.]

DICKENS

Hmmm...[*Reading*] "Great Expectations." By Charles...Charles Dickens? [*Pause, confused.*] "David Copperfield." "A Tale of Two Cities." Both by Charles Dickens. And this one? "A Christmas Carol," by Charles Dickens. [*To YET TO COME*] These are all books I will one day write?

YET TO COME

These books will make your name known for generations to come. However, you will purchase this immortality with your life.

DICKENS

[*Meekly.*]

And how will I die?

YET TO COME

[*Regarding the newspaper.*]

See for yourself.

[DICKENS picks up and un-wads the newspaper. Spotlight rises on CHORUS, downstage right. DICKENS begins moving toward the bed; as he reads, CHORUS recites the words aloud.]

CHORUS

The London Times, June tenth, 1870. Section D, page one. Obituaries, compiled by Ebenezer Stillwell. "The news of novelist Charles Dickens' death is quite upsetting to both the literary world and the public. Fans of his novels and public performances are mourning his untimely passing yesterday. Mr. Dickens died in his home while working on a new novel titled The Mystery of Edwin Drood. He was fifty-eight years old. Mr. Dickens' death serves as a warning to all who would attempt to live life at such a rapid pace. He simply asked too much of his body--travelling constantly, attempting an inhuman number of public appearances--and his body simply could not keep up. It failed him, and is now laid to rest. He is survived by his estranged wife, Catherine, and ten children."

[Blackout on CHORUS. DICKENS is speechless. He steadies himself with the bedpost, then sits down on the edge of the bed as his legs give out. YET TO COME glides to the footboard.]

DICKENS

I cannot comprehend what this means? Why is all of this being told to me now--tonight?

YET TO COME

Because, Charles, you are being given an opportunity. If you continue upon the path you have chosen, these things which you have witnessed will come to pass. But your fate rests in your own hands.

DICKENS

What must I do?

[YET TO COME, placing his hand on DICKENS' shoulder, gently forces him to lie down on the bed.]

YET TO COME

You are the author of your destiny. Should you choose to heed our warning, these tragedies may be avoided.

[DICKENS attempts to rise, but YET TO COME prevents him.]

DICKENS

What is this? What are you doing?

[YET TO COME places DICKENS' right hand across his chest, then takes his left hand, crossing it over his right. His posture is that of a body lying in a casket.]

This is not the ending I intend! Stop it! Stop this at once!

[YET TO COME steps back, but DICKENS seems to be invisibly restrained, unable to alter his position.]

YET TO COME

Charles, please be careful, and watch yourself closely, so that you do not forget the things you have seen and heard tonight, or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Remember--you are the author. You choose the ending.

[YET TO COME steps back into the shadows and exits.]

DICKENS

[Desperately.]

No! Come back! Please don't leave me here!

[DICKENS begins to twitch and jerk, as if in a fitful sleep, but more or less maintains his casketed posture.]

I can't...no, please...another chance...I love her...so weary...father...stop...love...no...Mary...Catherine...don't want this...must start writing!

[DICKENS wakes suddenly, frantic and disoriented, breathing heavily. He looks around the room, confirming that it is his, and that he is, in fact, alive and well.]

DICKENS

[Thoughtful.]

It was only a dream? [*Relieved.*] Oh, thank heavens! And what an outrageous dream, too. Strange visitors and whatnot. [*Pause. Shaking his head.*] Yes, quite a far-fetched dream! I believe I must have eaten something disagreeable last night.

[He climbs out of bed, stretching and yawning.]

I really should record the events of that dream before I forget them. Anonymous visitors...my father...Catherine--pregnant? [*Pause*] No...Catherine couldn't be pregnant--could she? No, no, of course not. That was all in my dream, too. Yes, all a dream, all a dream. All a strange dream. No more children for us...four is more than we bargained for. Not ten! No, certainly not ten!

[He makes his way to his desk and sits down.]

A strange, strange dream. How did it end? I can't seem to...you'd think I'd remember. It was the last thing I dreamed!

*CONTINUED*

[CONTINUED]

[Pause] Oh, I really should wake up after a dream like that and immediately write it all down. I've probably let hundreds of wonderful ideas go to waste that way.

[He sighs, picks up the sheet of paper from the night before, and reads.]

"Ezekiel Scrooge." Hmm...perhaps some improvement could be made, let's see. *Ebenezer* Scrooge? Oh yes, I believe I like that much better. Ebenezer Scrooge. What a fabulous name!

[Seated at the desk, he readies himself to write. Before he begins, inspiration strikes. He blurts out without thinking.]

Marley...? [Pause] "Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail."  
[Pause] An interesting sentence. Who could this Marley be? Where did such an idea come from? [Pause] Nevertheless, it sounds like a magnificent way to begin this story.

[He writes a few words, then stops, looks up, his mind searching.]

The date...what is today?

[He sees the newspaper from the day before lying near him on the desk. He picks it up and looks at the date.]

February sixth. That was yesterday. Today is February seventh.

[He writes the date at the top of his manuscript paper.]

February seventh, 1843--

[Suddenly, he lowers his pen and looks up, realizing something important.]

It's my birthday...I'm thirty-one...

[DICKENS allows this revelation to sink in. Then, after a moment of reflection, he shrugs, picks up his pen, and commences writing, reading his words aloud to himself.]

DICKENS

"Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt about that..."

[Lights fade.]

THE END