A Heart That Never Hardens
by carolinecrane

Summary

The pain of parting is nothing to the joy of meeting again. - Charles Dickens

That the fates of Jacob Marley and Ebenezer Scrooge were so perfectly aligned could only be explained by the excess of feeling that existed between them in life as well as death.

Many nights after his death did Marley sit in silent congress with Scrooge. Scrooge's ignorance of his presence was as much a comfort to Marley as a sorrow. How he longed for just a few more moments to warn his partner of the folly for which Marley was now suffering! Of the nights he wandered the earth, chains heavy about his waist as he bore witness to the suffering he’d ignored in life. The nights he spent sitting unnoticed by Scrooge were his only moments of rest, but how he longed for the ability to speak and be heard again.

That he was granted the favor by the Fates was a gift he could not expect to be given twice. It was enough to be permitted to watch as Scrooge kept to his word, keeping Christmas in his heart all the year through and doing good for his fellow man wherever he was able. He did all the things in his life that Marley hadn’t, and Marley rejoiced in knowing that Scrooge’s fate would be far different from his own.

As Scrooge’s heart lightened, so did Marley’s burden. It happened little by little, so gradually that he hardly noticed at first. In truth he paid little mind to his own burden, so joyous was he in his old friend’s redemption. He watched as Scrooge grew to be an old man, doted on by his niece and nephew and a houseful of grand-nieces and -nephews. Marley revelled in Scrooge’s joys, and when Scrooge took his final rest in his death-bed, Marley was by his side.

Marley did not expect Scrooge to see him there. Scrooge hadn’t been plagued by spirits again
since that fateful Christmas, and never once in the intervening years had Scrooge given the slightest hint that he sensed Marley’s presence, though Marley had watched over him more closely than any of his living friends. Even now he stood at Scrooge’s bedside while Fred clasped Scrooge’s hand, his eyes betraying his sorrow even as he smiled and laughed for his uncle’s sake.

“All is well, my dear Fred,” Scrooge said, his voice feeble with age and infirmity. “See here, it’s my dear old friend Marley come to walk beside me.”

Fred looked about him as though expecting to see a ghost, but Marley just smiled down at Scrooge.

“My dear friend. I have been here all the time.”

Scrooge’s answering smile was more fond than it had ever been in life, and Marley stepped closer and held out his hand.

“Is it time?” Scrooge asked, his free hand moving slowly across the cover to meet Marley’s. "Indeed, I am ready."

When Marley’s hand closed around his, Scrooge took one last, quiet breath and died. In that same moment he stood, leaving his body behind him to be mourned by the living, and took Marley’s arm to walk forward into his fate.

“But your chains, Marley,” Scrooge said, looking over at his friend. “I feared they would burden you for eternity.”

“As did I.” Marley pressed Scrooge’s hand where it rested on his forearm. “But it seems your good deeds these past years were enough to unburden us both.”

“I would as gladly have walked the earth with you for all time, my dear friend,” Scrooge answered. His grip on Marley’s arm tightened for a moment, and he released a quiet sigh. “Ah, Marley. My only regret is that I did not love you well enough in life.”

Marley let loose a laugh, bright and joyous in a way Scrooge had never heard him laugh in life. “Well then let us love one another in death, dear Ebenezer, for here we have all of time.”

Scrooge smiled again, and they walked arm in arm into eternity together.

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