

AN AMERICAN CHRISTMAS CAROL

A STORY OF CONVERSION AND REDEMPTION



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FOR
MARY ANN



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PREFACE

Miracles are a retelling in small letters
of the very same story which is written
across the whole world in letters too
large for some of us to see.

C. S. LEWIS



PART THE FIRST

CHAPTER ONE

*True miracles are created by men when
They use the courage and intelligence
That God gave them.*

Jean Anouilh

"**M**arley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatsoever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it and Scrooge's name was good upon change for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door nail."

The young lawyer closed the presentation copy of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and placed it carefully on a corner of his massive desk. What a strange Christmas gift for a secretary to give to her boss, he thought. He made a mental note that there were only four days until Christmas, and he had yet to buy her a present, or any of the rest of the staff, for that matter.

His chief legal assistant, Joe Poleski, entered his office promptly at

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five p.m. to remind him of tomorrow's most urgent matters. Already the cold Chicago streets were pitch dark. He slipped on his expensive overcoat and stepped onto the elevator to descend the ten floors down to Wacker Drive. It was a long walk to his L station on Wabash, but he needed the exercise.

As he exited the lobby of his office building into the cold dark Chicago night, he silently cursed himself for forgetting his rubberized overshoes. "If I keep doing this, I'll ruin these shoes, and God knows how much they cost!" He mumbled to himself as he checked his reflection in the plate glass window. He noted with special satisfaction his extremely expensive, diamond-encrusted, Swiss-made gold watch. It had been a present from his law firm when he had made partner last year. Out of all of the accoutrements of his wealth, power and prestige, this watch said it all. No one could say that Michael Barron Esquire, did not know how to dress for success.

There was a bounce in his step as he began his trek across the Loop of Chicago, but it wasn't due to the cold. He had just learned the size of his annual year-end bonus check from a friend in the accounting department. It had exceeded even his grandiose expectations. No wonder, he thought to himself, he had been made full partner in the law firm of Kinwood, Smith, Nelson and Barron.

Then again, he deserved it. Michael had worked hard all his life, gone to all the right schools, joined the right tennis and country clubs, even made sure he was on the letterhead of the best high-profile charities in

Chicago. Nothing in this world, he thought, is an accident, which is why, many years ago, he had become an agnostic. "God helps those who help themselves," he chuckled under his breath.

The streets of Chicago blazed with the lights of Christmas glowing from retail shops displaying their finest wares. Michael could have afforded any of the products he saw that night as he hastened across the loop, but he always hesitated before he bought anything, for the price of an article was more important than the article itself. He knew what a good buy was and no one was going to fool him.

When he arrived at the entrance to his L stop, he paused in front of the old wood structure that served as a newsstand under the tracks. The smell of roasting chestnuts in the brazier next to the stand was appealing. So, with his evening newspaper, he purchased a small bag of the treats. He had purchased his evening newspapers for many years from this vendor, a middle-aged black man dressed in multiple layers against the cold. Of course, Michael had never bothered to learn his name. To him, he was simply one of the millions of people in this world who didn't have the drive, the energy, the brains or the education to soar as high as Michael had done. Michael was never condescending towards this old man, because to do so meant he would have to acknowledge him, and such people were well below Mr. Barron's perspective.

"And a good evening to you, sir, and a Merry Christmas," announced Emmitt to his regular customer. Michael thought he was only working him for a tip, so he didn't bother to reply. He turned toward the stairs to the

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elevated tracks; he hopped aboard his subway car, and with a practiced eye, looked over the inhabitants. He was looking for a vacant seat where he could spread out and thus discourage any of the unwashed masses from sitting next to him. It's too bad taxicabs are so expensive, he thought. Otherwise, I would never take this filthy mass transit.

It was only a short ride on the L before Michael arrived at his stop. He lived in a high-rise luxury condominium, very near the lakeshore on the north side. As he regained street level, he stepped off briskly up the street to walk the four or five blocks to his cross street. He passed a completely dark alley and did not notice a man stepping out behind him. The man moved slowly and simply stared at the back of Michael as he continued on his journey. He was short in stature with white, medium length hair and dark glasses. The stranger was dressed in a gray windbreaker with a white shirt, dark blue pants and black shoes; his clothing was totally inappropriate for the weather. The most amazing thing about this man was his skin. If Michael had turned around, he would've thought he was staring at an albino.

But he didn't turn around. In fact, he hastened his steps along that dark street on the north side of the city. This part of his evening commute was a little too dangerous for his tastes. The streets were poorly lighted and he had heard of muggings in this area. His only concern was to get home as quickly as possible.

As he passed yet another alley, through his peripheral vision, he thought he saw some movement on the ground about 10 feet into the passage. He started to hesitate, thinking he should go back and investigate.

Chapter One

But his judicious nature got the better of him and he quickened his step. Before he could get more than a few feet further however, he was stopped dead in his tracks by a strange noise.

It was a female's voice... a low moan... like a wounded animal.

CHAPTER TWO

At first he thought it was a mound of rags on top of the snow. But then he heard the moan again. It was definitely a woman and she was either drunk or hurt. Against his better judgment, he decided to investigate.

"Are you all right?" he asked, immediately feeling stupid. Of course she wasn't all right!

As he inched forward, he noticed the condition of her old overcoat, topped with silver-white hair. Even in the dim light of the alley, he could see the angry dark stain growing on her head. Blood, he thought.

He stepped out into the alley and quickly scanned the street for possible sources of help. A corner telephone booth, a passing police car would've sufficed, but there was nothing except the cold darkness of the December Chicago night around him. He heard the old woman stir and meekly call for help. He turned and noticed that she had managed to sit up in a snow bank, bewildered and frightened.

"Don't worry. I'll get help!" he half-yelled at her. But she responded,

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"No, No. I'll be all right. Just help me to my feet."

"You need help, and you need it now." he said, assisting her. But she refused to listen to him and started to stumble out of the alley and down the street towards her home.

She didn't get too far. A few steps down the street, and she careened into the side of the building, barely maintaining her footing. Michael ran forward and grabbed her before she could collapse.

"I must call an ambulance," he said.

But she replied, "If I can just make it to my home. I'll be okay."

"Where do you live?" the young attorney inquired.

"Not far from here. A few blocks north, and then a few more blocks west. I can make it."

"Well, I'll walk with you at least part of the way to make sure," he replied. The few blocks she had described turned into a ten-block walk. But she seemed to gain strength as they walked along arm in arm.

They ended their walk in an old neighborhood of brownstone apartments. The old lady lived in a basement apartment at the front of the building. Michael helped her down the crumbling concrete steps through the basement door and into the front door of her tiny apartment. When she put her key into the door her legs finally gave out from the strain of the walk. As she began to collapse, Michael pushed open the door and carried her inside. He fumbled for the light switch, and when he flipped it he was amazed by what he saw.

It was basically a one-room apartment with a small bathroom and

kitchenette. The only outside illumination came from two small windows, near the ceiling, that looked out upon the sidewalk in front of the building. The entire area smelled with the musk of an old basement. Of course, none of this surprised Michael. He had seen such circumstances many times before. But he wasn't prepared for the books.

They were everywhere; from the floor to the ceiling, on every wall, on top of the bed and table, and in neat piles around the bed. There were books, hundreds of books.

As he helped the old woman get settled into the large double bed that dominated the room, he couldn't help noticing some of the titles of the books that surrounded him. *Meditations* by René Descartes; *War and Peace* by Tolstoy; *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky; *The True Believer*, by Eric Hoffer. "Not exactly light reading," he thought.

"My name is Sarah," she volunteered weakly.

"And I am Michael... Michael Barron," he offered. Without asking for permission he entered the small bathroom in search of first-aid supplies. He came back to her bedside and pulled up an old rocker. . " It doesn't look too bad Sarah," he observed, as he examined the wound on her head and began applying first aid.

"You're right, they only hit me once, to stun me and grab my purse," she explained.

"In any event, you're very lucky," he responded. "I really wish you'd let me call an ambulance."

"No, no. I really will be all right."

"Well," he said somewhat embarrassed. "Is there anything else I can

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do for you before I leave?"

"Perhaps you would be kind enough to put the kettle on? There are some biscuits on the top shelf over the stove as well. Will you join me?"

Perhaps it was the season, perhaps it was his loneliness, but Michael was in no hurry to leave. He did as she suggested and prepared a simple meal from what was available in her tiny kitchen. He sat down in the rocking chair next to her bed to share their refreshments. After Sarah had eaten, she became noticeably stronger and more focused.

She sat upright in her bed and focused directly on the young man. "And exactly who is my savior?"

"Me?" he asked, somewhat flustered. "I'm just an attorney. I was walking home to my condo by the lake when I heard your cries for help in the alley." He felt he was under the gaze of a seasoned police officer as she carefully took his measure by the cut of his clothes, his watch, and his haircut.

"Hardly a simple attorney, I would venture," said Sarah.

"And what about you?" Michael asked, wishing to change the subject as quickly as he could. She saw through his device, but allowed it to succeed.

"I'm just an old woman with no family, who works as an Aide at the hospital. As you can see, my only friends are long since dead." She swept her hand around the room to indicate the hundreds of classical books.

"Since the end of the second world war, when I came to America, my life has been one of service to other people, combined with an effort to educate my poor female brain," she said, with more than a touch of sarcasm.

The look in her eyes startled Michael. He had rarely seen such intelligence in a person's eyes.

They searched for common ground in their conversation, but it quickly became apparent that Michael with all of his first-class education was no match for this old Jewish woman. Mercifully for him, she quickly became fatigued and started to drift off. He decided to take his leave, resolving to drop by tomorrow to see how she was faring.

"Sarah, is there anything more I can do for you before I leave?"

"Could you help me take off this old woolen sweater, so I can sleep?" she asked. He did so. As she lay back down into the bed, he noticed that her left forearm appeared to have a tattoo on it. When she closed her eyes, he leaned forward to read the faded blue writing by the light of her bedside lamp. He froze as he read the inscription on her arm:

FELD---HURE A436528.

