

## THE WORKER'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

It was Christmas Eve in Rochdale and the local residents were happily spending what little they could afford out of their minimum wage to ensure they would find a little happiness and escape the harsh reality that they work for an unfeeling company for poor wages, with unions that won't offer the support they really need. Sure, they are okay with accident claims as the company's insurance takes care of that but anything related to high targets and unfair dismissal they just don't care. Outside in the square tuneless Britian's Got Talent rejects screech their way through popular Christmas carols whilst annoying salesmen-type vultures swooped on any weak-minded victim, hoping to get them to part with their hard-earned brass for charity and allowing their captives to escape with the knowledge that they are helping those in need where in reality they are helping those in greed.

Sadly, not everyone in Rochdale was enjoying the Christmas spirit. In a large run-down mill, there were still many workers who were forced to work overtime and attempt to achieve a ridiculous target in order to get enough money to afford the essentials in life – such as beer and phone credit. The evil laughter of their manager could be heard echoing through the floors as the poor workers cried for mercy when their breaks were stopped. The only thing they could look forward to was the cheap packets of biscuits distributed to each floor which they had to share amongst each other.

Hidden away in the dark recesses of the company was the union office where two union reps Bob Sutcliffe and Mick Jones worked. Bob enjoyed the warm comforting glow of the single radiator near his desk while Mick shivered trying to get warm from the flickering tiny candle the company had allowed him. He envied Bob who seemed to get all the best rewards from the company due to his willingness to give them what they asked of him.

"Right Mick," said Bob. "Have you prepared the goodies bags for the employees?"

"Yes, all done." Mick replied.

"Remember, the ones with the green sticker come with the more expensive prizes such as TVs – they are for the general managers. The yellow stickers are for music players and other medium price stuff. They are for the foreign employees. The rest are for everyone else."

Mick shook his head. "Sorry to mention this but don't you think this is a little unfair. After all, isn't the union supposed to support their members and ensure equality for all?"

"Mick, I'm disappointed in you. Don't you see that this is the reason you don't get all the perks I do. Look after the management and they look after you. As for the foreigners, we need to treat them well to make the company look good. The company want to achieve their goals of becoming one of the country's top digital retailers. So always support the company if you want to be successful.

"I understand that. But we should be fair to all our members. After all, they pay us to support them. Many of them struggle to reach these high targets and work overtime just to make ends meet."

Bob laughed out loud. "Bloody fools still pay us whether we support them or not. But if we did support them, it would be turning against what the company wants, and that means no bonuses for me. So, sod the members. We give them a free diary every year for a Christmas bonus. That's good enough."

Just then there was a knock on the door. Mick opened it and Richard, the general manger, walked in.

"Hello Bob," he said. "Have all the members voted on the new pay rise yet?"

"Yes, they have. Around 90% rejected it."

"Hmm, okay. Change the figures to the majority accepting it and when they enquire about it you know what to do."

Bob grinned. "Yeah, give them the usual bullshit that most of the votes came from the other mills so they can't prove we're shafting them."

"Has the replen and picking been timed?"

"Yes, we've doubled the result as you requested."

"Good work Bob," Richard gave him the thumbs up. "Another grand in your pocket."

Time passed and Bob looked up at the clock. Only half an hour to go and he'll be off home to his wife, who used to be his stepdaughter. A good meal, a pint of ale and a right good shagging from his young bride. They had been seeing each other even before his wife died of cancer and continued to do so after her death. Those who knew what he was up to were disgusted with him but Bob couldn't care less. It was his life and he will damn well live it as he pleases.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Mick opened the door to two smartly dressed gentlemen who entered the office.

"Good evening to you Sir," one of them said to Bob. "Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr Sutcliffe or Mr Mills?"

"Mr Sutcliffe. Mr Mills died seven years ago. On this very night actually."

"Our deepest condolences sir. I do hope his generosity has passed on to his surviving partner. Allow me to introduce myself. I am William Sutton and this is my associate, John Cunningham. At this festive time of the year, Mr Sutcliffe, it is our privilege and our honour to seek permanent employment for the poor in establishments such as this one, backed by a supportive union. Maybe we count on your support sir?"

Bob thought for a moment before delivering his reply.

"Are there no zero-hour contracts?"

"Why yes sir."

"And the employment agencies, I gather they are still in operation."

"They are, I wish I could say they were not."

"Well gentlemen. You asked for my support so here it is. I fully support the establishments I've just mentioned and those who are badly off must go there."

William shook his head. "Many would not rather go there. Many would rather die."

"If they would rather die then they had better do it, and decrease the Universal Credit and Job Seekers allowance population."

The two men lowered their heads and made their excuses to leave. It was quite clear they weren't going to get any support here. After they had left Bob and Mick noticed it was home time and went to grab their coats. Bob looked at Mick who had just emptied his hot water bottle. As a Christmas bonus he was allowed to fill it twice in one day.

"You'll be wanting the whole day off tomorrow I suppose."

"If it's convenient sir."

"It's not convenient. And it's not fair. Christmas is a humbug and a poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every 25<sup>th</sup> of December."

"Tis only once a year sir."

"Oh, very well, have the full day. But be back all the earlier the next day."

The two men left the office to go home to their families.

Bob reached his home and was greeted by his wife who had prepared him a delicious meal which he ate greedily. His wife took her place in the bedroom awaiting orders to attend to her husband's needs whilst he retired to the lounge.

He had just lit up a cigar when he felt a sudden rush of cold air sweep up his back. He decided to ignore it and went back to puffing his cigar. A minute later something else caught his attention. The sound of unholy wailing and the rattling of chains. He checked the television and the radio. Both switched off. He wondered what the hell was going on. The sounds kept repeating themselves and getting louder and louder. Closer and closer. Bob started to feel the fear creeping up to his chest as the sounds had reached the peak of their volume.

Suddenly there was a bright light and a ghostly apparition appeared in the room. The spirit was of a man who looked familiar and he had chains draped over his arms. With a bony finger he pointed to Bob and glared at him with lifeless eyes wedged in sockets that looked that they had withered over many years. Suddenly the spirit spoke – his voice full of misery and sorrow.

"Sutcliffe. Sutcliffe. Sutcliffe." He chanted.

Bob regained his composure. "Who are you?" He demanded.

"Ask me who I was." replied the spirit.

"Alright, who were you then?"

"In life, I was your partner. Ronald Mills."

Bob just stared in disbelief. Unable to comprehend the sight before him.

"You don't believe in me, do you?" enquired the spirit.

"Ha, I do not sir."

"Why do you doubt your own senses?"

"Because a slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheat. You may be an undigested bit of fish from the chippy, a curry from Sajaans Takeaway, a drop of beer from the local pub. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"

The spirit raised its arms and cried in a loud piercing wail as it rattled the chains on its arms. Bob panicked and fell to his knees.

"Man of the worldly mind, do you believe in me or not?" the spirit asked.

Bob trembled with fear. "I do, I do, I must. But why do you walk the earth and why do you come to me."

"I wear the chains I forged in life. I made them link by link and yard by yard. Now I am condemned to walk the world forever bound in chains as punishment for my greed and inhumanity in life. When our members asked for our help, I lied to them. I ignored them when they came to the office complaining about unfair treatment. I supported the company and sold the members out for the price of a pint."

"You were always a good man of business Ronald."

"Business! Mankind was my business. Getting the workers better working conditions and easier targets was my business. Now I am doomed to roam the earth with no rest and be forced to watch endless repeats of Ant and Dec's Takeaway. But you still have a chance of escaping my fate."

"How?"

"Tonight, you will be visited by three ghosts. Follow them and learn the lessons they teach. Only then can you be saved from the torment I now suffer. Expect the first when the bell tolls one."

It was indeed 1am when the first ghost appeared. Bob had gone straight to bed after the encounter and decided he was simply hallucinating - probably working too hard. After all he has to keep the company happy if he wants his perks. And now he is sat up in bed wide awake, positive he is not hallucinating now. Then the ghost spoke to him.

"I am the ghost of Christmas Past"

"Long past?"

"No, your past."

"What do you want with me?"

"Rise and come with me. I have memories to show you."

A bright light covered the room and when it cleared Bob found himself in the company rest room. Sat at a corner table he noticed his old friend John Winters. John was busy writing something down whilst drinking his coffee, with a look of determination on his face.

"You remember this man?" the ghost asked.

"Remember? Oh course." Bob said with excitement. "John and me had plans to rise against the company and make a better working environment. I remember there was a few of us with the determination to do it."

"But it never worked out that way, did it?" said the ghost. "One by one everyone went their own way. Some got easy jobs so didn't care about rising against the company as they had nothing to gain. You became a union rep, then rose to head of the union so you no longer had to worry about targets and unfair treatment. You decided to sup from the same cup as the general managers whilst poor John was left to fight alone."

"So?" was all Bob would say.

The ghost raised his arm. "Let us see another memory."

The light cleared and Bob found himself in his bedroom looking down at his late wife. He remembered this moment. It was the last time he spoke to her before the cancer took her life. Seeing her like this caused a build up of emotion as he remembered his vow to her, to find someone else after she had gone, and to look after her daughter. He remembered how he cried uncontrollably as the last sign of life faded from the eyes of the special woman he had loved all these years. And now he was hurting as he was forced to relive the pain he had suffered all those years ago.

"She was very special to you wasn't she." said the ghost.

"Very special," said Bob. "But what can you do? She died and I found someone else."

"Yes, you married her daughter. Your stepdaughter. You had sex with her."

"Yes, I did. Sex with her and her mum at the same time. Keeping it in the family. Keeping IT in the family. Get it?" Bob laughed.

The ghost indeed "got it" and waved his arms angrily. Another bright light faded and Bob found himself back in his bedroom in the present time. He decided to climb back into bed and get some sleep.

It was the bright light coming from the hallway and a deep booming voice calling his name that cause Bob to wake up. The time was now 3am. The voice continued to call out his name so he reluctantly staggered out of bed. Entering the hallway, he was faced with another ghost. This one was in the image of a man of large build with a long dazzling robe and a large bushy beard. The ghost introduced himself.

"Come in Sutcliffe, I am the ghost of Christmas Present. Now come on, time is short. Touch my robe and come with me."

They appeared inside a house which he had never seen before. The ghost told him that this was the house of Mick Jones, his fellow union rep. Bob was surprised to see that the house had very little furniture and only a small amount of food on the table. While other families were enjoying a full-sized roasted turkey Mick had to make do with slices of processed turkey that he had bought from Aldi. Mick sat with his son Tom, whom he referred to as Tiny Tom, whilst his wife sat sewing yet another rip in the clothes that were handed down to them from their kind neighbours. Bob learned from the conversation that Tiny Tom was getting weak from the lack of decent regular food and as a result was having to walk with the aid of a crutch.

Bob felt a lump in his throat. "Oh, kind spirit, what will become of Tiny Tom?"

The ghost replied. "I see an empty stool, and a crutch without an owner. If things do not change then the future I see could become a reality."

"Surely not," said Bob. "If the family can get good jobs and earn good money then there is no reason why Tiny Tom won't survive."

"Are there no zero-hour contracts? Are there no employment agencies?"

The light blinded Bob as the very words he spoke before were repeated until they faded into silence. When the light faded, he was back in his bedroom.

Bob woke up again and looked at the clock. It was now 5pm. This time there was no blinding light. Only a dark outline of a figure that he could only describe as the grim reaper. An image he had only seen in films. After a long exchange of stares Bob was the first one to speak.

"Am I in the presence of the ghost of Christmas Future?"

The ghost nodded slowly.

Bob got out of his bed. "Oh spirit, I know now that I'm not going to get any bloody peace unless I go with you. Now lead on so I can get this bloody thing over with."

The ghost raised its arms and this time they were shrouded in darkness. They found themselves in the company. However, something was wrong. There were no workers, no belts running and the computers were unplugged. The place seemed abandoned. Bob noticed a sheet of paper on the floor which he read:

## **TO ALL EMPLOYEES**

*As we have failed to reach service standard, we have decided to close down. We will be making redundancies and organising help for employees to find new jobs through agencies and zero-hour contracts. Most of the staff will have their employment terminated in July 2020 while a select few will remain to finish off any remaining requirements the company give them.*

Bob looked at the ghost in shock. "Oh spirit, I was sure of a cushy job for life. Tell me, what happens to me when the place closes."

The ghost brought Bob to floor eight and pointed to a man clinging onto a picking truck. He was reading a letter from the manager stating that he had failed to get the required minimum PI and was to be put on review. When the man spoke of his anguish of having to face the consequences, Bob recognised the poor man as his future self. He dropped to his knees and pleaded with the spirit.

"Oh, kind spirit. You have shown me that the company can never be trusted. How they use people and spit them out. All I did for them to save them money, to give them the power over the workers in the hope that they would keep me in my luxurious position till I retired. But now I see the light. Spare me this future and I will work to ensure the workers have a supportive union to help them get better jobs with lower targets and more worker's rights. I'm not the man I was. I'm not the man I was.

Bob found himself in bed again. The clock said 7am. It was all over. The spirits had done it all in one night. He had the power to change things and change them he will. After ordering a large turkey to be sent to Mick's house he set about making plans to support his members.

The next morning Bob sat at his desk and Mick walked in late.

"What is the meaning of coming in at this hour?"

"I'm sorry sir, I am behind my time. It won't be repeated. I was making rather merry yesterday sir."

"Well, I'm not going to beat around the bush. I'm not going to tolerate this behaviour any longer and therefore...I'm going to buy you a bigger candle.

Mick stood in awe trying to digest what Bob had said. He was expecting to be fired but he's going to get a bigger candle. Suddenly Bob's face formed into a large grin and he started laughing whilst Mick stood confused.

"Mick," Bob said. "I haven't taken leave of my senses. I've come to them. I want to help you and your family. Tiny Tom is going to grow up big and strong and he's going to become a union rep and help those in need to find suitable work."

And so, Bob became a man of his word. He became a better person, a better union rep and a pain in the arse to all corrupt money grabbing managers in his company.