

A Christmas Carrel

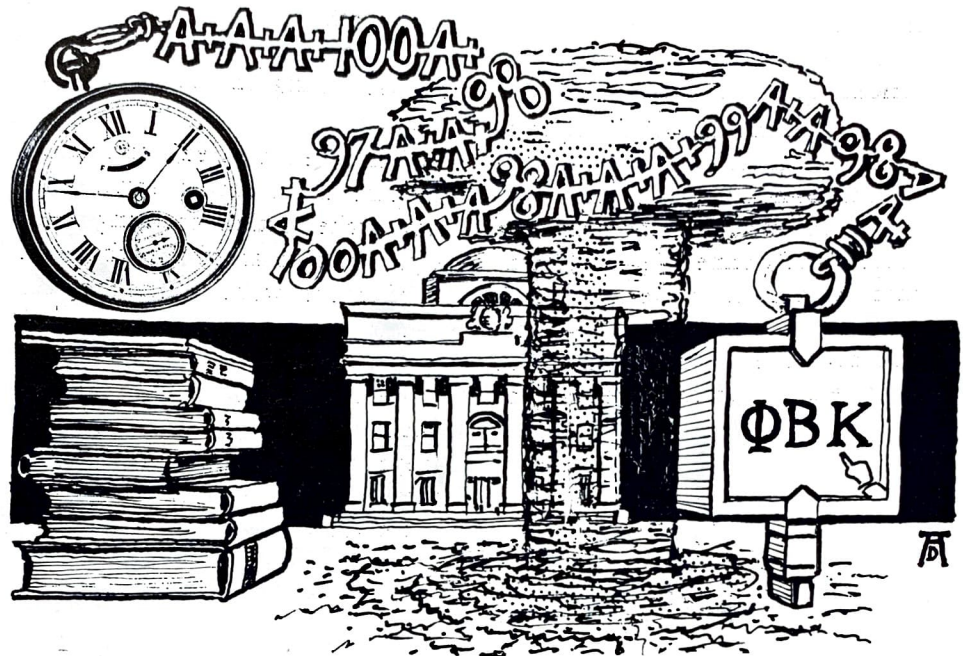
Knox Abernethy

I had studied the whole day before the Christmas vacation and was rushing to finish the last chapter of my book in those last maddening minutes before the library's closing. But, in the middle of the last paragraph the lights went out and I heard the slam of the door echo through the labyrinthine stacks.

I sat stunned in the total darkness and slowly gathered my senses. I shuffled through the corridor, down the stairs, and finally to the door. Desperately, I pounded on it and shouted. No one heard; the door remained tightly locked. In the faint light which passed through the doors I glanced about the main hall of the library in the wild hope of finding some clue that could release me from my unexpected incarceration. There was nothing but the familiar, deserted, main hall. But my eyes were attracted to the portrait which hung above the check-out desk; it looked strange, it — it was my old friend Joe Barleycorn! He'd graduated two years before, Phi Beta and all the rest, good old Joe. But in that dim light he looked so wierd, so ghost-like. Then I realized that the strange light had distorted the portrait of some anonymous patron of the college and given it the appearance of Joe.

In hope of finding some security, I wandered back to my carrel after giving up all attempts to break out of the library, and I resigned myself to spending the rest of the vacation there — I supposed I could get a lot of good studying done during the daylight hours. But surely someone would come the next morning and release me.

So, I settled down on the floor of my carrel, with books for a pillow and my overcoat for a cover,



and tried to get some sleep. I was just beginning to doze when I heard moans, and then the clanking of chains. I tried to convince myself it was just my imagination, but they were coming closer. I heard feet dragging, my name was being called; then, there before me, stood Joe Barleycorn, ghastly pale and hideous. He was bound in a huge chain forged of A+'s and numbers ranging from 97 to 100, and at the end of the chain, I saw he was dragging a huge Phi Beta Kappa key. He stared at me with eyes bleary with too much reading, lifted an ink-stained finger, and said, "You see me, ah yes, yes. And you see this chain which I drag with me everywhere I go. Yes, I must drag this with me, up every rung of the ladder, any many the hostile heads and hands I've cracked with that heavy gold key. But wait until you see the chain that you are forging for yourself — more weighty and more magnificent than even my own. And it will ensnare you in traps you never knew existed and

though it will crush others beneath you, it will also drag you down and someone more nimble will always get ahead of you. But tonight, my friend, you will meet three ghosts who will try to break that chain. Do not ignore them, but heed them most diligently."

And to my horrified amazement, he faded from my sight. I was now thoroughly perplexed, and certainly no longer sleepy. It took long hours to convince myself that I was deceiving myself under the extreme shock of being locked in the library, but, in the end, I once again was dozing on the floor.

I was awakened by a voice, "Well, son, don't go to sleep on me. Ah've gotta few things to show you befoh the evenin's out. Cummon." He grabbed my hand and we were rushing through space — and a cold, bitter wind was blowing. I now saw the man who clutched my hand — a true Southern gentleman with flowing white hair and waxed goatee, dressed in a finely tailored grey suit.

We landed on a warm and sunny rolling green lawn, at the end of which stood a gleaming white plantation home with tall pillars across the front and surrounded by magnolia trees and long rows of magnificent spreading oaks.

"Now let me introduce mahself. Ah'm the ghost of Davidson past. This is the home of a typical Davidson ginnelman of the past, of course, and yonner he sits sippin' his mint julep on the veranda befoh he goes out courtin' the most queenly belle in the country. He's jest relaxin' aftuh woopin' the



cotton-pickin' slaves all aftuhnoon, writin a speech for the next secessionist debate in the literary society."

"Let's go up and talk to him," I said. "I bet he'd want to know how the dear old Alma Mater turned out."

"Ah, no. Ya can't go up any closer than this. If ya do, you'll see how the paint's peelin' and the pillars crackin' and what an ugly face his ole man has. You see, the past is what ya make of it, much more so than the future. But if ya make too much of it, ya gotta keep yoh distance, so ya won't recall any nightmares."

"But what about Marshal Ney, and . . ."

"Marshal Ney. Ha! Ah s'pose they's a little school somewhere in England that boasts its seal was designed by Benedict Arnold and ah'll bet they have his bust lookin' out over the laberry."

I took my eyes from the picturesque home and was stunned to see that my guide had turned black and was now stooped and wrinkled and toothless;; his grey suit had turned into dirty workclothes, and he was resting on the handle of a broom.

"Yeh," he muttered, "this always happins at midnight aftuh folks stay awake thinkin' too long. Once a young feller asked me what ah'd do if ah ever woke up one mohnin' like this, and now ah know — ah stand outside the church ah used to be able to go to and ack real happy with all the folks who think they're makin' me happy. But you'd better wake up now, or they'll think you've gone plum crazy."

There I was, awake, on the cold dark library floor — the tall walls of silent books towering on every side and a few stray bits of light sifting through the windows from the night outside.

I heard footsteps — my heart stopped. Was there someone locked in the library with me? Some gorgeous young . . . A shriveled old lady stopped and looked down at me. "So you're here, are you? Well, get up and come along now. You're a Davidson student aren't you? Well, come along then. I've got a thing or two to show you. Some people say I'm a mad old lady hoarding my money, but I'm really a ghost, the ghost of Davidson present. And have I got some things to show you — look at that!"

She pointed to a sports car parked in front of a motel. "See the sticker on the window? Says Davidson, doesn't it? Hmph!"

"And look at that!" It was a party, a Christmas party, a Christmas reunion of old friends.

"You boys must think I'm so old and feeble I can't hear what you say or read your faces any more. Or maybe you think the English language and human face have

changed so much I don't know what they mean nowadays. Hmph!"

She then showed me churches, pews filled with fine young men dozing with their parents, while fine young men, who had seen no drinking or ungentlemanliness at the afterdance parties, preached fine young sermons. But most of what she showed me was hollow laughter and tinsel and mistletoe and heaps of food and heaps of bottles and heaps of torn ribbon and paper and heaps of heaps of heaps of good clean fun and Christmas spirits and Happy New Year and anything else to keep the noise going and the heaps growing.

"Yes," she mused, when it was all over, and we were quietly flying back through the misty darkness, "in two weeks Christ will have been born, term papers done, great times had, and glittering fabrications decorated to boast about to all the boys back at school. You think I'm so old I can't hear and see all that? Hmph!"

"Oh, I'm old and dried up, all right. Some people think that once I was young and beautiful, but I've always been old and dried up. Other people think that if they give me a drink from the Fountain of Youth I'll be young and beautiful, but I'll always be old and dried up, for I am the ghost of Davidson present. Now I must leave so you can meet another ghost and look behind another mask."

I was back in my carrel once more, and beside me stood an old man in long, rustling black robes, a long entangled beard obscuring the lower half of his face, the ghost of Davidson future.

"Look down at your left hand," he commanded. I looked at it, and beyond there was the new campus, shiny with ultramodern buildings (each with pillared facades, of course), and there was Dr. Macky-mac, showing wealthy dignitaries

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