

*He grabs his long white scarf from the hat-stand and wraps it round and round his neck. The front door flies open and FRED bounds in, all good humour.*

FRED. A merry Christmas, Uncle!

SCROOGE *darts into his office and slams the door in FRED's face.*

...God save you!

FRED *and BOB exchange a look. Then FRED throws open the door, undaunted.*

SCROOGE. God save me indeed, from such as you, nephew. A merry Christmas! Bah! Humbug!

FRED. You don't mean that, I'm sure.

SCROOGE. I do. What right have you to be merry? You're poor enough.

FRED *(laughing)*. What right have you to be dismal? You're rich enough!

SCROOGE. That I am! And through my own graft! Out upon a merry Christmas, you young fool. What's Christmas but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer?

FRED. Don't be cross, Uncle...

SCROOGE. If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding.

FRED. Uncle!

SCROOGE. And buried in the centre of four lonely roads with a stake of holly through his heart!

FRED. *Uncle!*

SCROOGE. He should! Keep Christmas in your own way and let me keep it in mine.

FRED. But you don't keep it!

SCROOGE (*low, dangerous*). Then let me leave it alone.

FRED. There are many things from which I have derived good without *profiting*. But I've always thought of Christmas as a good time. A kind, forgiving, charitable time. The only time in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-travellers to the grave.

*In the outer office, BOB listens attentively.*

And therefore, Uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good and I say, God bless it!

*BOB starts applauding, then stops as SCROOGE glares through the open door at him.*

SCROOGE. Another sound from you, Cratchit, and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your situation!

BOB (*to FRED*). You're quite a powerful speaker, sir. I wonder you don't go into parliament.

FRED. I might at that!

SCROOGE. Just what that place needs. Another popinjay!

FRED. Come, dine with us tomorrow.

SCROOGE. Us?

FRED. With my wife and me.

SCROOGE. Your *wife*. Saddled with such baggage at your age and, no doubt, a gaggle of hungry mouths on the way. You'll have children – boys. Those boys will grow up bad, of course. And run wild in the street without shoes or stockings!

FRED. Good heavens, I trust not!

SCROOGE. Why on Earth did you marry?

FRED. Because I fell in love!

SCROOGE *shakes his head.*

SCROOGE. I'll retire to Bedlam. Good afternoon!

FRED. I want nothing from you, Uncle. I ask nothing of you.  
Why can't we be friends? Mother would've wanted –

SCROOGE *winces. A moment between them.*

SCROOGE (*quiet*). Good afternoon.

FRED. I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute.  
But I've made the trial in homage to Christmas, and I'll  
keep my Christmas humour to the last. So a Merry  
Christmas, Uncle!

SCROOGE. Good afternoon!

FRED (*sings*). And a Happy New Year!

SCROOGE. *Good afternoon!*

*Back in the outer office, FRED pulls a face for the benefit of  
BOB, who smiles back.*

FRED. Well, Mr Cratchit. I know I can rely on a warmer  
welcome this side of my uncle's door, eh?

BOB. Indeed, sir!

FRED. And what of your plans for the great day?

BOB. The usual, sir. All the family round to Camden Town. My  
Martha's quite the young lady now and is 'prenticed at a  
milliner's. And I've an eye on a situation for young Peter  
that would be of great help to the whole family. Things...  
being a wee bit tight.

FRED (*thoughtfully*). Yes, indeed.

And the little fellow? Tim?

BOB. Oh. He is well, sir. Quite well.

BOB *glances down.*

FRED. Mightily glad to hear it.

*Two ladies appear at the front door, MISS DIMPLE and  
MRS BOONE.*