

Scene 1 – The Counting House, Christmas Eve.

(The scene is the inside of a counting house. Two desks are set, one high, one low. If painted flats are available, the lower of the two desks should be in front of a fireplace, in which is a single piece of coal, faintly glowing. Next to the taller desk is a coalscuttle. Upon both desks are great ledgers, lit candles, inkwells and quills. If you want to be authentic, cut the feathers off the ends of the quills; if you want to be theatrical, leave them on. Ebenezer Scrooge is seated behind the higher desk; Bob Cratchit, his clerk is seated behind the lower. They are both tallying columns of figures. Bob counts on his fingers.)

Enter Silus Barrow, the sexton, with his assistant, Toby Crisp. Silus is carrying a shovel and his hands and face are covered with grime.)

Silus: (To Toby) Take your ‘at off lad, we got company. **(To the audience.)** Marley was dead, to begin with. I knows, you see, ‘cos I buried him. With this shovel. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Toby: ‘E was as dead as one of them fings what’s dead. Whatcher call it? **(Thinks for a moment.)** Door-nail.

Silus: I just told ‘em that. You want to learn to pay more attention. It’s no wonder you’re just a sexton’s ‘elper. We dig graves, me and the boy. Well, I dig ‘em; ‘e mainly fills ‘em in. My mother give me the name Silus – Silus Barrow – and when you’ve got to wear a name like that, there’s not much else you can do ‘cept dig graves. This rancid looking article is Toby Crisp.

Toby: Rancid?

Silus: Means you attract the flies, boy

Toby: Oh. Fanks.

Silus: Keeps ‘em off me, any road. Now we’re going to be keeping you company through this little tale of ghosts and redemption. And I knows a thing or two about ghosts, working among ‘em every day as I do.

Toby: (Looking around nervously.) Ghoulies?

Silus: Now, boy, there's no need for language like that. **(To the audience.)** As I was saying, there is no doubt that Marley was dead. You've got to understand that, or none of what's to come will be nearly as mystical or interestin'.

(Exit Silus and Toby. Enter Trippet, holding some money.)

Trippet: (Coughs to attract Scrooge's attention.) I have brought the last payment, Mr Scrooge.

Scrooge: (Not looking up.) But it's not the last payment, is it, Mr Trippet?

Trippet: If you please, sir, seven and six is all that's left on my account.

Scrooge: But you're late. **(Looks up.)** Two days late by my reckoning. And that means interest.

Trippet: But it's Christmas, sir.

Scrooge: (Mimicking, nastily.) 'But it's Christmas, sir'. If you don't pay the interest at once there will be further interest to pay on your interest.

Trippet: But I only have two shillings left for a turkey.

Scrooge: Happily for you, two shillings is exactly what you still owe.

Trippet: (Handing over the money.) You're a cold-hearted curmudgeon, and no mistake.

Scrooge: And you are an insolent whelp. If I had the time I'd beat some civility into you. Good day.

(Trippet exits.)

Bob: (Nervously approaches Scrooge's desk. His eye is on the coalscuttle.) I was wondering, Mr Scrooge, if I may...that is to say, is there a possibility, it being so wretchedly cold, that I might have...

Scrooge: Did I ever tell you, Bob Cratchit, what happened to my previous clerk?

Bob: No, sir.

Scrooge: One foggy afternoon, near Christmas, he had the temerity to ask for more coal for his fire! He just came right out with it and asked!

Bob: Oh. What happened to him?

Scrooge: I told him he was surplus to my requirements. Now he's kept warm at the Parish's expense, not mine.

Bob: At the workhouse?

Scrooge: At the workhouse. Him and his good-for-nothing family. All of them parasites. Now, what was it you wanted?

Bob: Nothing. Nothing at all. **(He returns to his desk and tries to warm his hands round the candle.)**

(Enter Silus)

Silus: Nice bit of Christian charity, I don't think. They're queuing up to invite 'im to Christmas parties. I 'ave to admit it's a very small queue, on account of there only being one person in it. And e's a relative, so 'e don't count. 'E'll be along momentarily. Meanwhile, you're probably wond'ring what's 'appened to the boy. Well I sent 'im along to my old pal Jedediah Slope, the undertaker. I told 'im to ask for a long stand. It's a joke, you see, as I like to play on my 'elpers at Christmas. Old Jedediah'll send him into one corner of 'is workshop, with all them coffins, and leave 'im standing there. A long stand, you see. Yeah, I know, it's not very funny. But it's Victorian times and we 'ave to make our own entertainment.

(Silus exits. Enter Freddie.)

Freddie: A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!

Scrooge: Bah! Humbug! **(The 'Bah' should be a sharp exhalation, rather than a precisely pronounced word. There should be a slight pause between 'Bah!' and 'Humbug!')**

Freddie: Christmas a humbug, uncle? You don't mean that, I'm sure.

Scrooge: I do. What's Christmas but a time to find yourself a year older, but not an hour richer? If I had my way, every idiot who goes about with

'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.

Freddie: Uncle!

Scrooge: Nephew! Keep Christmas in your own way, and let *me* keep it in *mine*.

Freddie: Keep it? But you don't keep it.

Scrooge: Why would I? What good has it ever done anyone?

Freddie: Christmas is a splendid time, a wonderful time. It is the only time I know of when men and women open their shut-up hearts freely, and think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And there, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good; and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!

(Bob gives a little round of applause. He realises his mistake and pokes his fire instead.)

Bob: Oh. It's gone out.

Scrooge: Any more from you and you'll be seeking a new situation.

Freddie: Don't be cross, uncle. Come, dine with us tomorrow.

Scrooge: I'll see you in Hell, first. Good afternoon.

Freddie: Uncle! Say you'll come, just this once.

Scrooge: Good afternoon.

Freddie: I want nothing from you; why cannot we be friends?

Scrooge: Good afternoon.

Freddie: We have never had any quarrel to which I have been a party. But I'll keep my Christmas humour to the last. So a Merry Christmas, uncle!

Scrooge: Good afternoon.

Freddie: And a Happy New Year!

Scrooge: Good afternoon.

(Freddie shrugs at Bob and exits. Enter Mr Pilcher and Miss Pettigrew. They are well-dressed, carrying books and papers.)

Mr Pilcher: (Looking at his list.) Scrooge and Marley's, I believe. Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr Scrooge or Mr Marley?

Scrooge: Mr Marley has been dead these seven years. He died seven years ago this very night.

Miss Pettigrew: We have no doubt his generosity is well represented by his surviving partner.

(Scrooge looks increasingly grumpy.)

Mr Pilcher: At this festive season, Mr Scrooge, it is more than usually desirable that we should make some provision for the poor and destitute who suffer greatly at the present time.

(Bob claps his hand over his eyes and shakes his head.)

Miss Pettigrew: Many thousands are in want of common necessities; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts.

Scrooge: Are there no prisons?

Miss Pettigrew: Plenty of prisons.

Scrooge: And the parish workhouses? Are they still in operation?

Miss Pettigrew: They are. I wish I could say they were not.

Scrooge: I'm very glad to hear it.

Mr Pilcher: A few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time because it is a time when Want is most keenly felt. What shall I put you down for?

Scrooge: Nothing!

Mr Pilcher: You wish to remain anonymous?

Scrooge: I wish to be left alone. Since you ask me what I wish, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. It costs me enough to help the establishments I have already mentioned, and those who are badly off must go there.

Miss Pettigrew: Many can't go there; and many would rather die.

Scrooge: Then let them, and decrease the surplus population. Good afternoon!

(Miss Pettigrew and Mr Pilcher exit. Enter Toby.)

Toby: Ahem. **(Singing)** God rest ye merry, gentlemen! Let nothing you dismay...

(Scrooge picks up his ruler with such ferocity that Toby flees in terror, bumping into Silus as he enters.)

Silus: Don't be afeared there, young Toby. 'Is bark's worser than 'is bite.

Toby: But 'e was going to 'it me wiv 'is ruler. 'E 'ad the mad look of a fngy **(the 'g' has to be pronounced)**.

Silus: Very nasty them fngies.

Toby: Nah, I mean a demon.

Silus: Oh yes? Seen lots of demons, 'ave yer?

Toby: I seen 'im. **(Indicates Scrooge.)**

Silus: Now you run along and ask Mr Slope if 'e's got any of that stripy paint.

Toby: I'll ask 'im but 'e didn't have that stand fng you sent me for. 'E 'ad me waitin' for ages in the corner wiv all them coffins. **(He shudders as he exits.)**

Silus: (Calling after Toby.) And ask ‘im for a left-‘anded paintbrush, too. **(To the audience.)** I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking it’s a rotten trick to play on a boy with such limited prospects. But e’ll laugh about it one day. Prob’ly. Now, quite soon our Mr Scrooge ‘ere is going to be ‘aving a very unexpected meeting with someone ‘e ain’t seen for a while. If you’re of a delicate disposition you might want to nip off to the lavvy for a couple o’ minutes.

(Silus exits. Bob blows out his candle, puts his coat on and approaches Scrooge.)

Scrooge: You’ll want all day tomorrow, I suppose?

Bob: If quite convenient, sir.

Scrooge: It’s not convenient, and it’s not fair. If I stopped you half a crown for it, you’d think yourself ill-used, I’ll be bound.

Bob: Well...I’m not really....

Scrooge: And yet you don’t think *me* ill-used, when I pay a day’s wages for no work.

Bob: It *is* only once a year, sir.

Scrooge: A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of December! Have the whole day, but be here all the earlier next morning.

Bob: I will, sir. Merry Christmas, sir.

(Bob exits. Scrooge blows out his candle and puts on his coat and scarf and exits.)