


Scrooge as a Young Man, Isabelle

42

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Act I

 BELLE. There was no other way to tell you but forthrightly.

EBENEZER. I don't understand your decision to break our engagement.

BELLE. That is why I asked you to meet me here. *(Beat.)*
At half past six o'clock.

EBENEZER. I'm sorry to be so late. I had to stay and confer with the solicitors about the new leases and contracts. They will make me a huge sum.

BELLE. You see, you do understand my note after all.

EBENEZER. No, no. *(Taking her hands.)* Could anyone idolize you more than I?

BELLE *(a small shake of her head)*. Another idol has displaced me. And if it can't cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, that is the way of the world.

EBENEZER. What are you talking about? What idol has displaced you?

BELLE. A golden idol.

EBENEZER. Belle, be reasonable. I am only trying to deal with the world on its own terms. There is nothing the world professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth—and nothing on which it is so hard as poverty.

BELLE. You fear the world too much, Ebenezer. All your other hopes have disappeared, leaving one. The hope that the world will never scorn you for being poor.

EBENEZER. Belle—

BELLE. It's true. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until only one master passion engrosses you. Gain.

EBENEZER. What of it? Even if I have grown wiser, I am not changed toward you. Belle—am I?

BELLE (*turns away a moment; gently*). When our parents made the marriage contract long ago, you and I were poor, but content to be. We knew hard work would improve our situation modestly as years passed. That was enough. In those days, Ebenezer, you were another man.

EBENEZER. I was a boy. Witless and naive.

BELLE. You see? Your own feeling tells you that you are not what you were. Alas, I am. How often and how painfully I've thought of that, I won't say. It is enough that I have thought of it—and can release you.

EBENEZER. Have I ever sought release?

BELLE. In words? No. Never.

EBENEZER. In what, then?

BELLE. In a changed nature. An altered spirit. In everything that made my love of any worth and value in your sight. If there were no contract, tell me—would you seek me out and try to win me now?

EBENEZER (*colder*). You think not. (*Snow begins to fall*)

BELLE. I would gladly think otherwise—if I could. (*Goes to him.*) It's a hard truth, but it is the truth. If you were free today, can I ever believe you'd choose a girl without a dowry—you who by your own admittance weigh everything by gain or loss? Or suppose you did choose such a girl. I know that repentance and regret would surely follow. I have nothing to give you, Ebenezer. Nothing of what you value. I release you. I do so with a heart full of love for the man you once were. (*She kisses his cheek tenderly.*) You may feel a little pain. But only for a brief time. And then you'll dismiss the memory gladly—an unprofitable dream—and you'll be happy

