

*Thelma's mouth falls open*

**Mrs Reece** You've ironed that beautifully, Gordon. We were keeping it as a surprise, Thelma, but never mind. Take her to the star dressing-room, will you, Felicity? Because Thelma's fans are dying to see her as crotchety old Ebenezer . . .

**Felicity** Which one's the star dressing-room?

**Mrs Reece** Next to the boiler-room, dear. And make sure the rabbits don't get out.

*Felicity drags Thelma away*

Well, you know, Christmas comes but once a year . . .

**Mercedes** Better late than never, eh, Mrs R?

**Mrs Reece** Steady as you go, dear. Need any help?

**Mercedes** What do I need help for? Nothing the matter with me!

**Mrs Reece** You're looking better in yourself.

**Mercedes** Yes, I just get the occasional white hot flash of searing agony.

**Mrs Reece** You're an example to us all, Mercedes. This is my friend, Mercedes, ladies and gentlemen. She's playing Bob Cratchit and a schoolboy.

**Mercedes** Wouldn't miss it for worlds.

**Mrs Reece** And after all you've been through. Remind me, dear: how many supermarket trolleys were involved in the pile-up?

**Mercedes** Twenty-seven.

**Mrs Reece** What a dreadful business. Let's not dwell on it.

**Mercedes** And I came off better than some.

**Mrs Reece** Yes, I read the coroner's report.

**Mercedes** It's Mrs Van den Berg I feel sorry for. She was on the operating table five hours having that tin of corned beef removed. And for what?

Because I can't see her mounting a lawn mower again.

**Mrs Reece** I'm inclined to agree. Still, we must press on.

**Mercedes** You don't know what she puts on her snapdragons, do you?

**Mrs Reece** I think . . .

**Mercedes** The woman at the upholsterers, you know, with the leg, told me they thrived on baked apple *compote*, but Ulysses said she was having me on.

**Mrs Reece** I think I heard someone calling you, dear.

**Mercedes** Somebody wants me?

**Mrs Reece** Yes, backstage. I think they need you to lead the work-out.

**Mercedes** Ooh, I'd better get a move on.

*Mercedes exits with agonizing slowness*

**Mrs Reece** Best foot forward, dear. (*To the audience*) Well, I can't remember what I was talking about now. Have I mentioned our adventure weekend on Dartmoor? Would anyone be interested? What about you, Mercedes? No, perhaps not. It's more for the daredevil really. Those who don't mind a bit of rough-and-tumble. We get up to all sorts of high jinks, I can tell you. There's a beetle drive. And we have expeditions. There's

one to the post office. But that's quite a long way so we usually just go to the end of the road. And, if wet, we have hunt the thimble. I suppose it's not really advisable for those with high blood pressure. Although there is always a state registered nurse in attendance. And I think that's about it on the whole. I expect you'll want to mull it over. What's next? There's nothing else, is there? Apart from the play. Would you like to see it now? It's terribly good. The costumes are gorgeous.

**Voice** Bravo, Mrs Cav!

**Mrs Reece** Yes! Hear! Hear! Mrs Cavendish really has excelled herself this year. It's true. Some of these costumes look like real clothes. So it is with great pleasure that I give you—what's it called?—*A Christmas Carol*. Thank you. (*Indicating the microphone stand*) Does this stay here?

**Gordon** (*off*) No. You take it off.

**Mrs Reece** All right. Don't snap.

*Mrs Reece exits with the microphone stand*

*The spot goes out and the House Lights go down. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is heard at a variety of different speeds, then fades under Mrs Reece's voice. A spot comes up on the book*

*Gordon enters to turn the pages*

(*Off, through PA*) Is it still on? One, two, three, one, two, three. All right, how am I supposed to know? I'm not psychic.

*Gordon opens the cover of the book. Written on the first page, in florid handwriting, is "Once upon a time . . ." Gordon turns the page. Written on the second page is "Marley was dead, to begin with"*

(*Off, through the PA*) Marley was . . .

*Gordon turns the page, revealing a blank page*

(*Off, through the PA*) Gordon, that's too quick. Turn it back.

*He does so*

(*Off, through the PA*) Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt . . . all right! You can turn it now.

*Gordon turns the page, then the blank page, revealing the third page which reads "The end"*

(*Off, through the PA*) There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by . . . Gordon!

**Gordon** What?

**Mrs Reece** (*off, through the PA*) You've turned over too many pages.

**Gordon** That's all there is.

**Mrs Reece** (*off, through the PA*) Gordon, you are a ninny! Can anyone believe this man is supposed to be a stage-manager? Adrian, can you turn that light out, please? I can't be bothered with him any more.

*The spot goes out*