

PERUSAL SCRIPT

The CRICKET on the HEARTH

A Staged Radio Play

by

R. Rex Stephenson and Jody D. Brown



Newport, Maine

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THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

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CAST — 4w 5m 2either

Narrator (male or female)

Mrs. Peerybingle (Dot)

John Peerybingle

Tilly Slowboy

Stranger (later Edward)

Caleb Plummer

Mr. Tackleton

Bertha Plummer

May Fielding

Fielding -- May's father (Could also be played by a female)

Man

PRODUCTION NOTES:

- If the production is done in front of a live audience, then the Stranger should not only affect an old voice, but also wear a wig and beard until he becomes Edward.
- As would be in keeping with a live radio broadcast, all SFX should be live, or “practical,” performed by a man or woman at a props table, near a “microphone.”
- If the production is live in front of an audience and being broadcast on the radio at the same time, we suggest the use of wireless mics on all performers to pick up the sound best, even if you want to use prop-like radio mics.

Estimated running time: 1 hour

Production History

- In a slightly different form, *The Cricket on the Hearth* was presented in 2002 at Alice Lloyd College, KY; Kentucky Christian University, KY, and Ferrum College, VA.
- In a musical form, the Blue Ridge Dinner Theatre presented *The Cricket on the Hearth* during December, 2008, at Pigg River Community Center in Rocky Mount VA.
- In 2017, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, *The Cricket on the Hearth* was broadcast on NPR, WVTF Virginia's Public Radio Station.
- The writing and research for *The Cricket on the Hearth* were funded by a grant from the Appalachian College Association

THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH by R. Rex Stephenson. 4w 5m 2e. About 1 hour. Dickens' heartwarming Christmas tribute brings a genial spirit into the festivities as Mr. Tackleton, much like Ebenezer Scrooge, is changed through the course of the story, into a better person. With great plot points of suspense, intrigue, and mistaken identity along the way, this brisk adaptation allows the audience/listener to wonder if it will turn out all right. Published in 1845, this story of love at Christmastime, the tale of John and Dot Peerybingle, Caleb and Bertha Plummer, May Fielding and—well, that would be spoiling it—has long been a popular 'sequel' to Dickens' holiday favorite, "A Christmas Carol," originally published in 1843. This show is a great alternative for those tired of seeing the endless round of "A Christmas Carol" adaptations, for it is fresh and crisp. A present for the audience that is rarely opened so well as in this adaptation. This version is designed to be played in front of a live audience as if that audience were witnessing the entertainment being broadcast on live radio, sometime now or in the past. The added bonus is that for a small fee, the live theatrical presentation can be broadcast on the radio by the company who produces it in affiliation with a local radio station. Or it could be produced solely for the radio program. Another option for this play is to simply produce it in a story theatre version, with sets, costumes, lights and such. **ORDER #3326**

R. Rex Stephenson earned his B.A. in middle and secondary education at Ball State University. Upon graduation, Stephenson taught at Bayshore Middle School in Florida and Redkey High School in Indiana. He received his M.A. from Indiana State University in theatre and in 1973 became a drama professor at Ferrum College in Virginia, where he was named professor emeritus in 2013. In 1984, he received his Ph.D. in educational theatre at New York University. He was producer/director of the Blue Ridge Dinner Theatre from 1979 to 2012. Stephenson has had 24 plays for children and adults published, including *The Jack Tales*, *The Liberated Cinderella*, *Treasure Island*, *Galileo: Man of Science*, *The Jungle Book*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Connecticut Yankee*, and *Glorious Son of York*. He has been a winner in two major playwriting contests: The American Alliance for Theatre and Education 1995 award for *Too Free For Me* (published by Encore), and the IUPUI National Youth Theatre Playwriting Competition, "Excellence in Playwriting" award 1996 for *Jack's Adventures with the King's Girl*. In 1996 he was awarded an Appalachian College Association Faculty Research Fellowship, to research and write *The World Is My Parish*, a drama about the life of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. He also received the Sara Spencer Child Drama Award from the Southeastern Theatre Conference in 2007. Stephenson lives in Ferrum, Virginia and he has three daughters, Janice, Jessica, and Juliet.

Charles Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth*

A radio drama in three acts adapted by R. Rex Stephenson and Jody D. Brown

Act I

MUSIC: 30 SECONDS, THEN UNDERSCORES THE DIALOGUE

NARR: Good evening listeners, and welcome to radio station WFCC (or other appropriate acronym for the producing group) and tonight's presentation of our monthly series, "What? The Dickens!" Tonight's episode is an adaptation of "The Cricket On The Hearth," by R. Rex Stephenson and Jody D. Brown. Our broadcast is brought to you by [LOCAL SPONSORS¹] and the folks at [THEATRE GROUP]. The kettle began it! I say a full five minutes before the cricket uttered a chirp. Let me narrate exactly how it happened. I should have proceeded to do so, with my very first word, but for this important consideration—if I am to tell this story, I must begin at the beginning, and the beginning was the kettle. This is Mrs. Peerybingle, the mistress of this snug cottage. It is winter; almost Christmas; the water, which she just spilled on her feet, is uncomfortably cold.

DOT: (*Loud angry manner that builds*) Oh! Oh! Good gracious, you are cold! You stupid, stupid, stupid... you lid, bless me—you have fallen to the bottom.

SFX: WATER HISSING AND SPUTTERING

NARR: She has, you have probably noticed, mislaid her temper. The kettle was both aggravating and obstinate. It was quarrelsome and hissed and sputtered morosely at the fire. Oh, did that lid employ a monstrous resistance to coming out of the water.

SFX: SIX CLOCK CHIMES; SOFT GURGLING OF WATER

The clock chimed. You're correct, it is six o'clock in the evening and the kettle surrendered, accepted defeat and began its gurglings—almost musical as it warmed to a boil.

Now the cricket was loud and a little trill. I say this so you will know I am being completely honest—yet they went very well together, the cricket and the kettle. And here the cricket DID chime in!

SFX: CRICKET SOUNDS

At this exact moment. Good heavens, how it chirped! Its shrill, sharp, piercing voice resounded through the house. At this very moment, Dot enters with her baby.

DOT: Hush now kettle and you too cricket. I've heard John's wagon.

SFX: DOOR OPENS, WIND, DOOR CLOSES, FOOTSTEPS

DOT: John, you must nearly be frozen to the bone.

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PERUSAL SCRIPT -- The Cricket On The Hearth - Radio Play by *R. Rex Stephenson & Jody D. Brown*

NARR: John kisses her softly on the forehead—then heads for the fireplace. I know you have noticed, so to set your mind at ease. I confirm your observations. John is much older than his young wife, Dot -- more than a decade, but less than a generation.

JOHN: I'm near frozen, Dot.

DOT: John, I wish you wouldn't call me Dot.

JOHN: What else are you? You are but a dot...the period, as it were, in my life. I made a joke.

NARR: The nurse, Tilly, chirped in while taking the baby.

TILLY: Ain't he beautiful? Don't he look precious in his sleep?

JOHN: Very precious. He generally is asleep, ain't he?

TILLY: Good gracious, no!

JOHN: Whenever I see him, his eyes are generally shut.

DOT: What you do not know about babies would fill a book, John Peerybingle.

JOHN: True, Dot. I don't know much about it. However, a spot of tea would help warm an old carrier that been driving into the wind all day.

NARR: I must explain about Miss Slowboy—uh, Tilly. While she was composed of the best of intentions, her inability to completely control her limbs had brought the *Precious One* into contact with doors, dressers, stair rails, bedposts, and other household accouterments that proved not only irksome to the baby, but sometimes painful.

TILLY: Master John, he is the very image of you.

JOHN: I think he has less hair. Dot dear, where is my tea?

NARR: At this very moment, our friend, the cricket, chirped.

SFX: SOUND OF CRICKET CHIRPING.

DOT: Hey day! Our friend is merrier than ever. And that cricket is sure to bring us good fortune. To have a cricket on the hearth is the luckiest thing in all the world.

SFX: CRICKET CHIRPS SEVERAL MORE TIMES

JOHN: Your tea warms me heart.

DOT: The first time I heard its cheerful little note was on that night when you brought me home—here to my new home, to be its mistress.

JOHN: Nearly a year ago.

DOT: Yes it was. And this cricket was here to welcome me. It seems to say, you would be kind and gentle and be patient with one as young as me.

JOHN: And Dot, have I lived up to the cricket's promise?

DOT: The cricket spoke the truth, John, for you are the most considerate and affectionate of husbands. This has been a happy home, and I love the cricket for its sake. What new packages did you bring in?

JOHN: Look at this one. Can you guess what is inside?

DOT: A round box—not too heavy...a wedding cake?

JOHN: How did you ever think of that?

DOT: Whose is it, John?

JOHN: Read the address.

DOT: (*Troubled*) My goodness! My goodness.

JOHN: Yes. Who'd have thought it!

TILLY: Don't keep a poor nanny in suspense. Who is to be wed?

DOT: Careful with the baby.

TILLY: I'm always careful when I'm holding...

SFX: SOUND OF PERSON FALLING INTO A CHAIR

NARR: Poor Tilly lost her balance and fell back in the chair.

TILLY: I'm fine. . .the baby's fine.

DOT: The wedding cake goes to Gruff and Tackleton, the toymaker.

TILLY: Wed? Who is to be the "fortunate" lady?

JOHN: May Fielding!

TILLY: Oh, goodness. She is so young...he seems so old.

DOT: He is old. And so unlike her. Did you know, John, that May and I were girls at school together?

JOHN: Yes. Tackleton told me.

DOT: How many years older is Tackleton than you, John?

JOHN: Probably about three or four years.

DOT: I thought him at least twenty years past your age, John.

NARR: The announcement of the pending celebration changed both the manner and the mood in that snug little cottage. The cricket must have noticed it also, for he had stopped chirping. Somehow, the room was not so cheerful as it had been.

JOHN: I declare—I've clean forgotten the old gentleman!

DOT: The old gentleman?

JOHN: In my wagon. He is asleep—or at least he was asleep. I must bring him in.

TILLY: Is Mr. P. bringing in a “mysterious stranger?”

DOT: Tilly, what an imagination you have.

SFX: DOOR OPEN, WIND, DOOR CLOSES, FOOTSTEPS

JOHN: Come in. You must really be frozen.

NARR: The stranger entered with John. Unfortunately, he was covered with snow and icicles hung from his beard.

JOHN: This is the old gentleman I found sitting by the roadside.

DOT: Come, Stranger, sit by the fire. John, you found him in the open air.

JOHN: Yes, he gave me eighteen pence for a ride. Please, go stand by the fire.

NARR: The stranger thanked him and while walking to the fireplace took particular notice of Dot. He stopped, turned to John, and said:

STRANGER: Your daughter?

JOHN: Wife.

STRANGER: Niece?

JOHN: W-I-F-E!

STRANGER: Indeed. Very young.

NARR: The stranger notices the baby in Dot’s arms and says...

STRANGER: Girl?

JOHN: Boy.

STRANGER: Also, very young.

DOT: Two months and three days—though the doctor compares him with the general run of children at five months old! He was vaccinated just six weeks ago! Took it very finely—barely cried!

SFX: KNOCK, DOOR OPENS, WIND, DOOR CLOSES, FOOTSTEPS

NARR: Caleb Plummer comes into the room. He is the village’s one and only talented toymaker.

CALEB: Good evening, John, Mum, Tilly. Good evening, Mr. Unbeknown. How’s the baby, Mum?

DOT: All thriving, Caleb.

JOHN: You’ve come for the packages, I’ll warrant. Business good?

CALEB: I’m busy enough. Christmas brings out the demand for toys. There’s a run on the Noah’s Ark. Though with what Mr. Tackleton pays, they are not done to my satisfaction, I want ye to know!

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JOHN: I think this is the reason for your visit: this small, potted flower. Not a leaf or a bud damaged. It was expensive....the season, you know.

CALEB: It's beautiful. It would be cheap to me, whatever the cost. Anything else?

JOHN: Another package "For Caleb Plummer."

SFX: PACKAGE NOISE

CALEB: "For Caleb Plummer With Cash." With cash, John; I don't think it is for me. Yes, it is mine. I might have had the cash indeed, if my dear boy in South America had lived.

JOHN: He was a good chap. I loved him like a son.

CALEB: You remember him, Mrs. P?

DOT: Yes, as strong and kind a young man as I ever knew. Very handsome.

CALEB: He was that, he was. Now what's in the box?

SFX: BOX OPENING

CALEB: It's a box of dolls' eyes for my daughter's work. I wish it were her own sight in that box, John.

JOHN: Aye, me too. Wish it was or could be.

CALEB: To think, my poor blind daughter should never see the dolls she creates and them staring at her so bold all day long. A shame. A shame, John.

JOHN: Yes, Caleb. 'Tis true. But she couldn't ask for a better papa.

CALEB: Let me be off. I'll bundle up everything. He hasn't been here, has he? Tackleton?

JOHN: He's to home, I imagine – counting his money...

(They all chuckle)

...or courting his love to be.

CALEB: He'll be here tonight; I shall go, so as to miss him. You know what's strange, John? He mostly wants hideous toys made for children. Yesterday, I made a Jack-in-the-box with red eyes and a face that no mother could love. Pop that Jack up a couple times and a child wouldn't sleep for days.

NARR: At that very moment, with the air of a Shakespearean actor, Tackleton bursts into the room. He almost shouts.

SFX: DOOR OPENS, WIND, DOOR CLOSES, FOOTSTEPS

TACK: You are here? Wait a bit and I'll give you a lift home. John, my best to you, and my very best to your pretty wife. Handsomer every day and looking ever so young.

DOT: A compliment from you; does it reflect your state of mind—owing to your impending wedding?

TACK: So you know all about it?

DOT: I have got myself to believe it, somehow.

TACK: Was it a hard struggle?

DOT: Very. However, let us all warm ourselves with a bit of tea.

NARR: This, I'm sure you have discovered, is Tackleton the toy merchant, often known as Gruff and Tackleton, for that is the name of his firm. However, Gruff had been bought out long ago, leaving only his name and some say, and I think quite correctly, his nature. Tackleton's parents had forced him into the toy business—quite honestly. He would have made a better moneylender, or attorney or even a sheriff; but now he was trapped in the peaceable pursuit of toy making. He had to admit, at least to himself, that his livelihood depended on children and he loathed them all. Still, Tackleton, the toy merchant, was going to be married. In spite of this, he was going to be married. And to a young wife at that, a beautiful young wife.

TACK: In three days, Christmas Eve, that's my wedding day.

NARR: Have you noticed that he has one eye wide open, the right and the left eye nearly shut, and the one eye that's nearly shut is always the most expressive? Had you noticed it?

TACK: Yes, that's my wedding day.

DOT: John, that's our wedding day, too.

TACK: I ask a word with you.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS

TACK: We're in the same boat, you might say.

JOHN: What same boat?

TACK: The age disparity. Come and spend an evening with us before the wedding friend.

JOHN: Why?

TACK: For the appearance, man. The two of you always appear, though I doubt personally if it is true, to be happy, and Mrs. P takes her duties and responsibilities as wife seriously, and I think the two of you would produce a favorable effect on my future wife. You agree?

NARR: At this point, for some unbeknownst reason, the cricket chirps quite loudly.

SFX: CRICKET CHIRPING

TACK: I hate that noise. Why don't you kill that cricket? I always do.

JOHN: You kill crickets?

TACK: Scrunch 'em. That I do. Let me tell thee why it is in your best interest to visit my house. You see, women persuade each other that they're contented and couldn't be better off. I know their way.

JOHN: Your knowledge of women surprises me.

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TACK: Listen, John. Learn from me. Women emulate each other. If your wife says to my wife-to-be, “I’m the happiest woman in the world, and mine’s the best husband in the world,” then my wife will say the same to yours and more, and they’ll half believe it.

JOHN: You mean she don’t really believe it?

TACK: Your wife, she honors and obeys, and that, my friend, is quite enough for me. But do you think there is anything more in your marriage?

JOHN: I think that I should chuck any man out of the window who said there wasn’t.

TACK: Doubtless you would. I’m certain of it. Goodnight; pleasant dreams.

NARR: All of a sudden, and I mean all of a sudden, when Dot poured the Stranger some tea, she screamed and screamed again and dropped her very best teapot.

(DOT screams)

SFX: CHINA POT AND CUP BREAKING

JOHN: DOT! Are you ill? What is it?

DOT: I’m better now. It was kind of a shock, John, something coming before my eyes—then it was gone. Quite gone now.

TACK: I’m glad it’s gone. Caleb, come here. Who’s that with the white hair?

CALEB: I don’t know, sir. Never seen him before in my entire life.

TACK: Strange. Yes, well, bring the wedding cake. All right now, Mrs. P.?

DOT: Yes, goodnight, Caleb and Mr. Tackleton.

TACK: Goodnight. Careful how you carry that box. Let it fall and I’ll murder you. See you and Mrs. P. at my house soon. You shan’t regret it.

STRANGER: I beg your pardon, and I am reticent to ask, but might I impose on your kindness and rent a bed here? ‘Tis a bad night and I fear without shelter I might not last till the morn.

DOT: Of course, you may stay. Certainly.

JOHN: I don’t object, but—

DOT: Hush, dear John. I’ll make him up a bed. Tilly, bring the Precious One.

JOHN: *(To himself)* What frightened DOT, I wonder. Tackleton couldn’t be correct, though in business he is quick and sly. Yet there is more to my marriage than honor and duty. I know there is.

NARR: Each winter evening, whether cold or mild, fair or windy, Dot and John sat in the glow of fire listening to the kettle and their faithful cricket, and John’s heart grew light and happy and he thanked his Household Gods with all his might and cared no more for Gruff and Tackleton than you do.

End Act 1

Act 2

MUSIC: 30 SECONDS, THEN UNDERSCORES THE DIALOGUE

NARR: Caleb Plummer and his blind daughter lived all alone, in a little cracked nutshell of a wooden house, which was in truth an eyesore when compared to the grand brick house of Gruff and Tackleton. Poor Caleb Plummer's dwelling. You could have knocked it down with a hammer and carried off the pieces in a cart. Now I said that Caleb lived here, but his poor blind daughter lived somewhere else, in an enchanted home, where scarcity and shabbiness were not and trouble never entered. There is no sorcery here—if one discounts the magic of a devoted, steadfast love that a parent feels for a blind child. The blind girl never knew the walls were blotched and bare, nor that the iron was rusting, wood rotting, furniture ragged and worn. Nor had she any idea that their master, Tackleton, was cold, exacting, and uninteresting. You see, Caleb had painted him as an eccentric humanist, who was the guardian angel of their lives, yet would suffer to hear no thanks or praise. This was the world of the Blind One, full of beauty, art, poetry and goodness, that only she could see and her father could create.

BERTHA: I've brewed you a wonderful pot of tea, Father. Can you smell it?

CALEB: Yes, Bertha. Careful now. We wouldn't want any of that hot liquid to burn one of your precious hands.

BERTHA: I need no help, Father; I know every inch of our beautiful home. Now sit and I'll serve you. A great artist such as yourself deserves to be waited on.

CALEB: I am no artist, but a humble toymaker.

BERTHA: Not an artist? What about your beautiful new great coat? Would a humble toymaker possess such finery?

NARR: Let me be completely honest; it was in no way a greatcoat. It was a poor man's ragged, patched, and thrice-owned garment.

CALEB: Yes. My beautiful coat.

BERTHA: I'm so glad you bought it, Father.

CALEB: And the tailor. Quite a fashionable tailor. He normally only creates for lords and their ladies. It's much too good for me.

BERTHA: Too good, Father! What can be too good for you!

CALEB: I'm half ashamed to wear it. Someone called out last night, "Holla there, aren't you a member of Parliament?"

BERTHA: I see you, Father, as plainly as if I had the eyes. I never want when you are with me. A blue coat.

CALEB: Yes, bright blue.

BERTHA: I remember the blue of the sky. Is it like the sky, Father?

CALEB: Like the sky, Daughter.

BERTHA: I can see you Father; well almost see you – your smiling face, your twinkling eye, your dark hair, looking so young and handsome.

NARR: Poor Caleb. Has ever a father tried so hard to be a father? But I have always believed that Caleb had confused himself about himself and everything around him, for the love of that blind daughter. Never would he allow himself when near his daughter to reveal anything but a merry heart and a pace that would put a footballer to shame. Even when it became clear that his son, her brother, had died in South America, the father never shared that news, but kept a pretense, by reading letters from across the ocean that he himself composed.

CALEB: I've three more Noah's Arks to complete before Christmas Eve... Shall I ever finish?

BERTHA: You are speaking quite softly. Are you tired?

CALEB: Tired. Me? No!

(BERTHA softly sings an appropriate Christmas song)

SFX: DOOR OPENS, WIND, DOOR CLOSES, FOOTSTEPS

NARR: Again, Mr. Tackleton burst into a room that was not his own. You can believe me when I say that Tackleton was a man in search of common courtesies.

TACK: Stop. Stop! I can't afford your singing. Too much work needs to be accomplished.

BERTHA: Mr. Tackleton, how you go on.

TACK: If a bird can chatter, but won't chatter—maybe it is because he needs to be about his work, so that he might feed his family.

CALEB: Bertha, he sees us as hard-working songbirds.

BERTHA: Mr. Tackleton, you are always so merry and light-hearted with us!

TACK: Poor idiot!

CALEB: *(Stage whisper)* He is speaking of the grotesque Jack-in-the-box I finished yesterday.

NARR: No. Tackleton's reference was to Bertha. He did believe she was really an idiot, and I dearly believe the reason was, because he equated a disability with intelligence, and also, and this the more important of the reasons, because she was genuinely fond of him. He could tell. Everyone could tell.

TACK: *(Speaking a bit slower and louder)* So, how are you, Bertha?

BERTHA: Quite well, Mr. Tackleton. As well as you would make the whole world if you could.

TACK: *(Stage whisper)* No gleam of reason. Not a gleam. Poor Bertha.

NARR: At this moment, and I for one cannot explain it, except that Bertha was a truly loving person, she kisses Tackleton's hand.

SFX: SOUND OF KISS

TACK: Is something the matter?

BERTHA: I bless Heaven for making my world so precious and bless you for coming to cheer me.

TACK: (*Stage whisper*) How can she bless Heaven for making her world black? This is Bedlam and I fear she is not too far from being fitted for a strait jacket.

CALEB: (*Changing the subject*) If I might presume, the reason for your visit, Mr. Tackleton?

TACK: Bertha, come here. Shall I tell you a secret, Bertha?

BERTHA: If you want.

TACK: This is the day on which little what's-her-name, the spoilt child, Peerybingle's wife, pays her regular visit to you. If I'm correct, you have a "pic-nic"?

BERTHA: Yes. This is the day.

TACK: How would you like it if I joined the party!

BERTHA: Did you hear, Father? Mr. Tackleton wants to join us.

CALEB: Yes I hear, but I'm dumbfounded.

TACK: This is my purpose, and I'll be quite frank. I want the Peerybingles to converse with my new bride. Bertha, I am going to be married to May Fielding on Christmas Eve.

SFX: FAST FOOTSTEPS

BERTHA: Married! You, Mr. Tackleton?
(*She is heartbroken*)

TACK: (*Assuming she doesn't understand; again in a slow, loud manner*) Yes, Bertha, married! Church, parson, glass coach, wedding cake, white dress and all the rest of the tomfoolery, a wedding. Don't you know what a wedding is?

BERTHA: I understand. I know what a wedding is, Mr. Tackleton.

TACK: Do you? It is more than I had hoped for. Then it is settled. May, her father, and I, of course, will join the party. You'll expect us?

BERTHA: Yes.

TACK: Does she, Caleb? Take care she doesn't forget.

CALEB: She never forgets. It's one of the few things she ain't clever in.

TACK: Every man thinks his own poor geese are swans. Caleb, get your hand busy on those Arks.

CALEB: Good-bye, Mr. Tackleton.

SFX: DOOR OPENS, WIND, DOOR CLOSES

BERTHA: Tell me something about May, Father. She is very fair?

CALEB: She is indeed.

BERTHA: Her hair is dark, darker than mine. And May's voice is sweet and musical. Her shape—

CALEB: There's not a doll in all our home to equal it. And her eyes
(He realizes what he has said)

BERTHA: Her eyes?

CALEB: *(He tries to change the subject)* Shall we sing again?

BERTHA: No, tell me again about our benefactor, Mr. Tackleton. His face is kind and tender. His character is known throughout our village as honest and forthright. This is true, is it not, Father?

CALEB: Yes. Honest and true.

BERTHA: He is older than May?

CALEB: Yes. But I'm sure it will make no matter.

BERTHA: How fortunate is May. To be his loving companion, his nurse in sickness and his constant friend in suffering and sorrow. What a privilege this would be. Will she do all this, Father?

CALEB: No doubt of it.

BERTHA: I love her, Father. I do. Oh, if only I could be . . .
(She stops)

She is blessed, Father. Truly blessed.

SFX: FOOD BEING PACKAGED

NARR: In the meantime there was some commotion at John Peerybingle's, for baby was being bundled, food packed, drinks gathered, all in preparation for the journey. On the way, John delivered his packages, while Tilly and Dot kept Precious One warm and quiet. Soon after many stoppages to take parcels in and give them out, and retrieve others for some distant destination, the small wagon arrived at the door that allowed access to the Blind Girl and her father. As I have noted before, it was a happy home. May, the intended bride, and Tackleton, the pretentious groom, are already present.

SFX: DOOR OPENS, WIND, DOOR CLOSES, FOOTSTEPS

DOT: May! My dear old friend. What a happiness to see you.

JOHN: Those two could have been born sisters.

CALEB: Aye. That's the gospel truth.

DOT: We should talk, May, of those merry schooldays. It will make us both young again.

TACK: Why, you aren't particularly old now, are you?

DOT: Being married to John adds at least twenty years to my age. Don't you think, John?

JOHN: More like forty.

DOT: How many years, Mr. Tackleton, will you add to May? I'm sure I don't know. However, I predict it will be more than fifty, but less than one hundred.

(Everyone laughs)

TACK: Yes, Yes. Very funny, "More than fifty, but less than one hundred."

DOT: Remember, May, how we used to talk about the husbands we would choose? How young, how handsome and how lively they would be. Mine was not to be that; I'm sure you've noticed.

MAY: But he's as good a man as there is in our little village.

JOHN: You think so? Listen to her, Dot.

BERTHA: We all agree to that, don't we, Father?

CALEB: Yes, we all agree to that. But when they were in school, who would have guessed it? Not I.

DOT: Nor I. In all truth, I never fixed on John; the gospel truth is, I never thought of him at all.

DOT: And May, if I'd told you that you were someday to wed Mr. Tackleton, why you would've slapped me, wouldn't you, May?

NARR: May didn't say yes, but she certainly didn't say no or express "no" by any other means. The lack of denial resulted in a silence. And it was a deep silence; if I may interject my honest opinion, everyone realized it and all looked to Tackleton to break the tension. Finally, he laughed, quite shouted, he laughed so loud.

(All laugh)

The others modestly joined in; I'm sure you noticed that.

TACK: You girls couldn't help yourselves. You couldn't resist us, aye John. Here we are! Where are your handsome young bridegrooms now?

DOT: Some of them are dead. Some of them are forgotten. Some could not imagine that we forgot them so. No. I doubt if they were here today, they could believe their own eyes.

JOHN: Why, DOT! With what zeal do you speak? What does this mean?

DOT: I did. Did I? Bertha, shall I help you with the tea?

BERTHA: That would be lovely.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS

TACK: May dear, where are you going?

DOT: To help us with tea, Mr. Tackleton.

TACK: Yes. Yes. Excellent idea.

SFX: MORE FOOTSTEPS

FIELDING: To me, it has seemed, and I have no little experience in such matters, that girls are girls, and by-gones should be by-gones; young people, and I'm sure you've noticed this Mr. Tackleton, the young are thoughtless persons, with little concern for the wishes of others.

TACK: Yes. I have noticed it. In some, not necessarily all. I'm sure, sir, you will agree.

FIELDING: Well, when speaking directly of my May, and I say this with no modesty due, she has been a dutiful and obedient child; that, my good friends, I can take no credit for.

TACK: Surely the acorn don't fall far from the tree.

FIELDING: Let us all hope so. Obviously, she has followed my recommendations, that you sir, Mr. Tackleton, are an eligible husband—one to be desired. No one could deny that. You agree, Mr. Peerybingle?

(No answer)

Don't you agree, Mr. Peerybingle?

JOHN: I think so.

(Quickly)

Yes.

FIELDING: I know you realize, Mr. Peerybingle, and I will not recount for you, that May's background is one of gentility. She was raised in a circle of those, some of whom could trace their heritage to the Normans. It is not necessary to mention that our circle then, was composed of those whose position in society came from either inherited titles or invested funds. However, now we are reduced in purse.

FIVE MORE PAGES IN ACT TWO

ACT THREE COMPRISES EIGHT PAGES