

THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

By Charles Dickens
Adapted By Eileen Enwright Hodgetts

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 m, 5 f)

THE CRICKET: A fine figure in a green suit.

MARY "DOT" PEERYBINGLE: The young wife of John Peerybingle.

TILLY SLOWBOY: The clumsy nursemaid

JOHN PEERYBINGLE: A letter-carrier, a lumbering, slow, honest man.

CALEB PLUMMER: A poor old toymaker.

THE STRANGER: Edward Plummer, son of Caleb.

TACKLETON: A stern, ill-natured, sarcastic toy merchant.

BERTHA PLUMMER: The blind daughter of Caleb Plummer.

MAY FIELDING: The bride-to-be of Mr. Tackleton.

MRS. FIELDING: May's mother, peevish, querulous old lady.

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SCENE SYNOPSIS

ACT I, SCENE 1

The home of John Peerybingle, two days before Christmas.

SCENE 2

The home of Caleb Plummer, Christmas Eve.

SCENE 3

The home of Caleb Plummer, Christmas Eve, later.

ACT II, SCENE 1

The home of John Peerybingle, Christmas morning.

SCENE 2

The home of John Peerybingle, Christmas night.

TIME

About 70 minutes

STORY OF THE PLAY

To find a cricket on the hearth is a sign of good luck. John Peerybingle, the parcel carrier, and his young wife, Dot, are happily at home with their baby and nursemaid, Tilly. Two days before Christmas John brings a mysterious stranger home who seems to upset Dot. The local toy maker, Mr. Tackleton is, at this time, trying to force an eligible young lady, May Fielding, into a loveless marriage with the help of Mrs. Fielding. Caleb Plummer and his blind daughter, Bertha, the "benefactors" of Mr. Tackleton's attention, according to Caleb, are really poor and downtrodden, unbeknownst to Bertha. Bertha is heartbroken at the announcement of Tackleton's marriage. Further complications arise between Dot, Mr. Tackleton and the mysterious stranger. All is resolved, after much misunderstanding, on Christmas Day. Even the miserly old Mr. Tackleton has a change of heart. This very neglected, yet delightful Dickens story provides a cheerful alternative to the other, traditional stories at Christmas time. And it can also be produced at any time of the year.

NOTES

Throughout the play the Cricket character acts as narrator explaining any action that takes place offstage and also setting each new scene. At the beginning of the story, John Peerybingle, the parcel carrier, and his young wife Dot are seen happily at home with their baby and the nursemaid, Tilly Slowboy. However, two days before Christmas, John brings home a mysterious old stranger who seems to upset Dot, although she will not explain her reasons. The story goes on to tell how the miserly toymaker, Mr. Tackleton, is taking advantage of young May Fielding, whose fiancé has died in South America, and how he and May's mother are forcing her into a loveless marriage. Also featured in the story are Caleb Plummer and his blind daughter, Bertha. Caleb has told Bertha that they are rich and happy and that Mr. Tackleton is their generous benefactor, although they are in fact poor and downtrodden. Believing what her father has told her, Bertha is heartbroken to hear of Mr. Tackleton's intended marriage to May Fielding, as she herself is in love with him. While they are all visiting Caleb's house on Christmas Eve, Mr. Tackleton discovers Dot Peerybingle at a secret meeting with the mysterious stranger who appears to be a young man in disguise and advises John Peerybingle that he must rid himself of his faithless wife. Dot refuses to explain what is going on and the Stranger mysteriously disappears. All is resolved, after much misunderstanding, on Christmas Day when the mysterious stranger turns out to be May Fielding's long lost love who has come in disguise to find out whether she still loves him. Bertha finally realizes that she would not want to marry old Mr. Tackleton. May and Edward are married and reconciled with May's mother, and Mr. Tackleton realizes the error of his ways. The play ends with a lively Christmas party. Wherever possible, Charles Dickens text has been retained although the story has been edited and rearranged in order to provide more dramatic tension, and to clarify the motives of the characters.

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ACT I
SCENE 1

(AT RISE: The cottage of John Peerybingle, a modest but cheery room furnished with a table and chairs and two arm chairs each side of a fireplace. There should be a hob for setting a kettle by the fire. Also included in the setting are a wooden cradle and a small footstool. There are a small number of Christmas decorations. At the opening of the scene the CRICKET is onstage and addresses the audience. Suitable clothing for the cricket would be bright green and brown pants, vest and shirt and a green top hat which he sweeps from his head as he bows to the audience.)

CRICKET: Welcome, welcome to the humble home of John Peerybingle, the carrier, which by the way is also my home. And who am I you may well ask, and you do ask, don't you? I, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am the Cricket on the Hearth and here is the very hearth on which I live, sometimes tucked in under a flagstone, sometimes hiding behind the kettle, sometimes up there on the mantel. It is a very fortunate home that has a cricket on the hearth, very fortunate indeed. My merry singing helps to pass the long winter evenings: *(The Cricket now sings a few bars of music and performs a jig. He stops abruptly.)* Also a home blessed with a Cricket is a home blessed with good fortune, a home where all the household fairies are in harmony. A home where a husband and wife can live together in happiness, where children can grow and ... oh, here comes the mistress now. Shhh, not a word that you have seen me, not a word.

(Enter MRS. MARY PEERYBINGLE commonly known as "Dot". She is a plump and merry young woman. Humming to herself she sets the kettle on the fire and then calls offstage.)

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DOT: Tilly, Tilly Slowboy, hurry up and bring the baby down. Mr. Peerybingle will be here any minute now. *(She talks to herself as she sets food on the table.)* Cold and hungry he'll be, I know for sure. Such a raw night out there and him traveling so far in all weathers. Now come along kettle you get on with your boiling, we want everything ready for my dear John when he comes. Tilly, Tilly, hurry up with the baby. *(She fusses with a Christmas decoration.)* How pleased he'll be to see this little bit of Christmas. *(Enter TILLY SLOWBOY with a blanket wrapped baby in her arms. TILLY is a tall, gangling, slow witted young girl.)* Oh, do be careful, Tilly, mind the baby's head.

TILLY: Oh, I does mind it M'um but it do always seem to be banging itself into things.

DOT: Just you give him to me and you can finish setting the table. *(She takes the baby and coos into the blanket.)* Whose his mother's previous baby then?

TILLY: I likes these ornamentations M'um? What are they for?

DOT: Why for Christmas you silly goose. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve.

TILLY: Oh, and there was me forgetting. Slowboy by name, Slowboy by nature, that's me.

DOT: And tomorrow is our wedding anniversary. Tomorrow I will have been married to Mr. Peerybingle for one whole year. Think of that Tilly, one whole, wonderful year. Oh, I hear the cart now and the dog barking.

(DOT rushes to open the front door and greet her husband. JOHN Peerybingle is a large, slow moving man, considerably older than his wife. He is wrapped in layers of clothing which Dot tries to help him with while holding the baby with one arm and talking all the while.)

DOT: *(Cont'd.)* Oh, goodness, John. What a state you are in with the weather.

JOHN: Why you see, Dot. It, it ain't exactly summer weather. So no wonder.

End of Freeview

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