

Spotlight Publications

The Cricket on the Hearth

Adapted by Ron Nicol



Dickens

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THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

By Ron Nicol

Adapted from the Charles Dickens story

CAST (in order of appearance)

John Peerybingle, a carrier, a lumbering, slow, honest man

Mary 'Dot' Peerybingle, his much younger wife

The Stranger

Caleb Plummer, a poor old toymaker employed by Tackleton

Tackleton, a stern, ill-natured, sarcastic [toy](#) merchant

Bertha, Caleb's blind daughter

May Fielding, a friend of Dot Peerybingle

Mrs. Fielding, May's mother, a peevish, querulous old lady

The Spirit

Time: Rural England in the 1840s.

Running time: 50 minutes.

Light comes up R. The cricket is chirping. Dot is sitting by the fire. John, carrying a delivery basket containing parcels, enters his cottage

Dot My goodness, John! What a state you're in with the weather!

John Well, it an't exactly summer weather, Dot, so no wonder. I've been fighting pretty stiffly with the wind to-night. Been blowing north-east. Straight into the cart the whole way home.

Dot Poor old man! Give me a moment and I'll help with the parcels like a busy bee. Now, there's cold ham, and butter and a crusty loaf. Come sit at the table, John.

John sits while Dot sorts the parcels. The cricket is still chirping

John That cricket's merrier than ever to-night, I think.

Dot To have a cricket on the hearth is the luckiest thing in the world. The first time I heard its cheerful little note was the night you brought me here to my new home nearly a year ago. Its chirp was such a welcome to me. It seemed to say you'd be kind and gentle with me and wouldn't expect to find an old head on the shoulders of your foolish little wife. It spoke the truth, for you've been the best, most considerate, most affectionate of husbands to me. This has been a happy home, John, and I love the cricket for its sake!

John Why then, so do I Mary, so do I.

Dot There an't many parcels, John. What's this round box? Heart alive! It's a wedding-cake!

John Leave a woman to find out that. It's my belief that if you was to pack a wedding-cake in a tea-chest, a woman would be sure to find it out directly.

Dot Where's it going? My goodness! Tackleton the toymaker!

John Indeed. Who'd have thought it? Tackleton and May Fielding to be wed!

Dot May and I were girls at school together, and Tackleton's as old

as - how many years older than you is Tackleton?

John Let's not have such talk, Mary. Age don't signify.

Dot So these are all the parcels, are they, John?

John Why no - I declare I've clean forgot the old gentleman! He was asleep in the cart the last time I saw him...

The Stranger enters DR. He is Edward disguised as an old man with white hair and a beard and wearing clothes of an earlier time

Why, here he is! (*Shouting*) You're a good sleeper, sir!

John indicates a chair by the fire and Edward sits

That's the way I found him. Sitting by the roadside! Upright as a milestone and almost as deaf. 'Carriage Paid' he said, and gave me eighteen-pence. Then he got in the cart - and there he is.

Edward I was to be left till called for. Don't mind me. Is this your daughter, my good friend?

John Wife.

Edward Niece?

John (*shouting*) My wife! Dot!

Edward Indeed? Very young! A lot?

John (*shouting*) Dot! Her name's Mary - but I call her Dot.

Caleb enters and crosses the yard. He's wearing a great-coat made of sackcloth with 'Glass' on the back in bold lettering. He enters the cottage

Caleb Good evening, John! Evening, mum!

John Busy just now, Caleb?

Caleb Pretty well, John, pretty well. Rather a run on Noah's Arks at present. I want to improve on the toy but I don't see how it's to be done at the price. Anything in the parcel line for me, John?

John A small box. Here you are.

Caleb 'For Caleb Plummer. With Cash.' With Cash? I don't think it's for me.

John With Care. Where do you make out cash?

Caleb Oh, to be sure, With Care. It might've been with cash indeed, if my dear boy in the golden South Americas had lived. You loved him like a son, didn't you? It's a box of doll's eyes for my daughter's work. Wish it was her own sight in that box, John.

John I wish it was, or could be.

Caleb To think she never even sees the dolls, and them staring at her all day long! Wait! Something for Tackleton. A wedding cake! That's what I came for, but my head's so running on them Noah's Arks I forgot. He hasn't been here, has he?

John Not he. He's too busy courting.

Tackleton enters, crosses the yard and enters the cottage

Tackleton Oh, you're here, Caleb. John Peerybingle, my service to you. More of my service to your pretty wife. She gets handsomer every day, and younger, that's the devil of it.

Dot (*coldly*) I should be astonished at your paying compliments, Mr. Tackleton, but for your condition.

Tackleton You know all about it, then?

Dot I've got myself to believe it somehow.

Tackleton After a hard struggle, I suppose?

Dot Very.

Tackleton Last day of the first month in the year, that's my wedding-day.

John Why, that's the anniversary of our wedding-day too.

Tackleton Odd! You're just such another couple. John, a word with you.

Tackleton takes John aside. During the following Dot exits with the parcels, returning to clear things from the table and exit with them

You'll come to the wedding? We're in the same boat, you know.

John How in the same boat?

Tackleton The little disparity in ages, you know, between husband and wife. Come spend an evening with us beforehand.

John Why?

Tackleton For sociability, you know.

John I thought you were never sociable.

Tackleton The truth is you've got a comfortable appearance together, you and your wife. We know better, you know, but...

John No, we don't know better. What are you talking about?

Tackleton Well, we'll agree we don't know better, then. I was going to say you've the sort of appearance to produce a favourable effect on the future Mrs. Tackleton. I don't think your good lady's very friendly to me in this matter of the wedding, but say you'll come.

John We're keeping the anniversary of our wedding day at home.

Tackleton What's home? Four walls and a ceiling! There are four walls and a ceiling at my house. Come to me! It's as much your interest as mine that women should persuade each other they're quiet and contented and couldn't be better off. If your wife says to my wife that she's the happiest woman in the world and hers is the best husband in the world, my wife will say the same to yours, and half believe it.

John Do you mean to say she don't believe it, then?

Tackleton Ah, you dog, you're joking. Your wife honours and obeys you no doubt, and as I'm not a man of sentiment that's quite enough for me - but do you think there's anything more in it?

John I should chuck any man out of the window who said there wasn't.

Tackleton Doubtless you would, I'm certain.

The cricket chirps

Why don't you kill that cricket, eh? I would! I always do. I hate their noise.

John You kill your crickets, eh?

Tackleton Scrunch 'em, sir! Scrunch 'em!

Dot enters. She stops and stares at Edward, who is surreptitiously adjusting his wig and beard, and gives a sudden cry

John Mary! Darling! What's the matter? Are you ill? What is it? Tell me, dear!

Dot Only a fancy, dear - a kind of shock - something coming suddenly before my eyes - I don't know what it was. It's gone, quite gone.

Dot sinks into a chair. John kneels beside her anxiously

Tackleton I wonder where it's gone and what it was. (*Aside to Caleb*) Caleb, who's that with the grey hair?

Caleb Don't know, sir. Never seen him before.

Tackleton Come! Bring that box. You shall carry it across the yard for me. Mrs Peerybingle, you're all right now, I hope?

Dot Oh, gone! Quite gone!

Tackleton Good night, then! Good night, John. Take care how you carry that wedding cake, Caleb, let it fall and I'll murder you!

Tackleton leaves the cottage, crosses the yard and exits, followed by Caleb with the box on his head

Edward I beg your pardon, friend, the more so as I fear your wife hasn't been well. The bad night which made the shelter of your cart acceptable is still as bad as ever. Would you in your kindness suffer me to rent a bed here?

Dot Yes, yes. Certainly. I'll make up a bed directly. If you'll follow me, sir, I'll show you to your room.

Edward Thank you kindly. I think I might retire immediately.

Dot exits R, followed by Edward

John What frightened Dot, I wonder, and what did Tackleton hint at? I've no intention of linking what he said with Dot's strange behaviour, but the two things come into my mind and I can't keep 'em apart.

He sits beside the fire as the lighting fades R and comes up L. Caleb and Bertha are at the work-table, Bertha is making a doll's dress and Caleb is painting a doll's house. Caleb's sackcloth coat has been hung up to dry

Bertha You were out in the rain last night, father, in your beautiful new great-coat.

Caleb My beautiful new great-coat. From such a fashionable tailor. It's too good for me.

Bertha Too good, father! What can be too good for you? I can see you, father, as plain as if I had the eyes I never want when you're with me. A beautiful new great-coat, and you dear father, with your merry eye, your smiling face, and your dark hair. Looking so young and handsome!

Anxious not to continue this conversation, Caleb changes the subject

Caleb There we are, that's this doll's house finished. As near the real thing as sixpenn'orth of halfpence is to sixpence.

Bertha You're speaking quite softly. You're not tired, father?

Caleb Tired! What should tire me, Bertha? I'm never tired.

The Cricket on the Hearth

"The Cricket on the Hearth" is the third in the series of 'Christmas Books' written by Charles Dickens between 1845 and 1848.

Plot Summary

When a mysterious stranger arrives, John Peerybingle suspects that his much younger wife Dot and the newcomer are secret lovers. Then Caleb Plummer's blind daughter Bertha, in love with Caleb's employer Tackleton, learns that Tackleton is about to marry her friend May Fielding. John makes a discovery that seems to confirm his suspicions, but that night the Cricket on the Hearth attempts to dismiss John's doubts with a series of visions. The mysterious stranger is Caleb's missing son Edward, who has returned to claim his childhood sweetheart May. Thanks to Dot's intervention, Edward marries May, Tackleton gives his blessing to the marriage, and John and Dot are finally reconciled.

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