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THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

**Dramatized
by
Marian Jonson**

**From the story
by
Charles Dickens**



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(THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH)

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THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

A Play in Three Acts
For Six Men and Two Women, Extras*

CHARACTERS

JOHN PEERYBINGLE a postal carrier
MARY PEERYBINGLE his wife
BOXER their dog
CALEB a toymaker
BERTHA his daughter
MR. TACKLETON of Gruff & Tackleton, Ltd.
THE CRICKET
EDWARD (The OLD MAN and the SAILOR PRINCE)

*TOYS: Milkmaids, The Haymaker, Peasant Dolls,
a Soldier, The Guardsman

Note: BOXER is to be played by an actor.

TIME: Shortly before Christmas, 1840

PLACE: A village near London, England.
Caleb's Toy Shop and the lanes just outside.

SCENES

ACT I: Early on a winter evening.

ACT II: While the Cricket watches.

ACT III: Before the midnight bells.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *It is evening. The light from the lamps shines along the snowy ground and the sides of the tumble-down building which houses the toy shop. The inside of the shop is dark. Church bells are heard in the distance and JOHN's voice singing "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" not always on key but always with great good cheer. In a moment, the singing breaks off and JOHN is heard shouting.*

JOHN (*off*). Whoa! Whoa, there! (*Sounds of neighing and stamping.*) There...there, now!

(At the same time a huge, amiable BOXER ambles on from L, perks up his ears as he hears JOHN's voice, turns and trots off again, his tail wagging happily. In a moment, BOXER returns, dragging MARY by the hem of her coat. She is a cheerful, round-faced little woman carrying a package in her arms.)

MARY (*laughing at BOXER*). Boxer! Stop that! Boxer! You'll make me drop the pie in the snow! (*BOXER wags his tail.*) Oh, you'd like that, would you? Then Bertha would have no supper. (*BOXER peers up toward the toy shop and lets go of MARY's coat.*) That's a good dog! (*BOXER runs, tail wagging, to the corner of the shop, peers around it into the other lane, then*

trots back as if trying to tell her something.) Boxer, what on earth is the matter with you this evening?

(From the other side of the shop, along Pudding Lane, comes what appears to be a mound of parcels on legs, still singing "God Rest Ye..." BOXER, barking in answer, rushes around the corner and straight into the legs. An arm appears clutching at the tottering parcels and as MARY rounds the corner, JOHN, BOXER, and parcels go down in a scramble of flying legs and boxes. JOHN is lying full length surrounded by the parcels of all sizes and shapes, he looks up happily and smiles at MARY.)

JOHN. A Merry Christmas, my dear!

MARY *(laughing)*. Oh, John! John Peerybingle, I should have known it would be you! A Merry Christmas, indeed, and you lying full length in the snow!

JOHN *(sitting up and surveying the parcels)*. Aye, a clumsy fellow I am. How could you ever have married such a gangling clumsy fellow as I am, Mary?

MARY *(smiling down at him)*. I can't imagine. Unless it might be he's clumsy, indeed, but oh, so good and kind! *(MARY stretches out her hand to JOHN.)* You'll get no supper sitting there in the snow, John. *(BOXER grabs hold of JOHN's collar and begins to pull him up.)*

JOHN. Supper, you say? Aye, though it's very little I ever eat, as you well know, my dear. *(JOHN scrambles to his feet. He is a tall, rugged man with a homely, gentle face. His movements and his speech are mostly slow and thoughtful.)*

MARY (*teasing*). Oh, very little, John, very. (*BOXER reacts to this shaking his head sideways, then as JOHN looks at him, up and down.*) So I've brought an extra large pie just to be sure the little is enough.

(They laugh together. From offstage comes a MAN'S VOICE, calling, and CALEB appears hurrying down Pudding Lane. He is an elderly man, bent and tired looking, with a worried, quizzical expression. His hair is white and he wears a patched old jacket, obviously too thin for the winter cold.)

CALEB (*a trifle breathless*). John! Ah, there you are, both of you...and laughing. (*He smiles at them with a kind of wonderment.*) What a good sound it is.

JOHN (*nodding*). You're most welcome to laugh along with us, Caleb. To be sure, you'd be most welcome.

CALEB (*smiles wanly*). Thank you, John. But I...(*He looks worriedly toward the toy shop.*) John, I've been out looking for you, up and down the length of the lanes. You're late today.

MARY. Just what I was about to tell him. Later than he's been in all the whole two years we've been married to one another.

JOHN (*slowly*). Ah, but it's a special day, my dear. I'd an errand to do for Caleb, here. And so many bundles and letters and parcels I must deliver before Christmas, you know. (*He starts picking them up and BOXER helpfully picks up the farthest ones and plops them down in front of John.*)

CALEB. Christmas. Ah, indeed, Christmas. (*Looking again unhappily toward the shop.*) Mr. Tackleton is always at his worst...that is to say...his...

MARY. We know, Caleb. There's no kinder way to say it. Mr. Tackleton's worst is very...very...*(She breaks off, unable to find a fitting word as JOHN and CALEB nod in agreement.)*

JOHN. As I was saying, 'tis the first Christmas, my dear, with the new postage stamps on the letters and...

MARY *(interrupting)*. Oh, John, may I see one? What are they like?

JOHN *(holding out a stamped letter)*. Why, only bits of paper.

CALEB *(peering at the letter)*. Fantastic! Amazing! A picture of the Queen's head on every letter now, John?

JOHN. On every one. You buys the little stamp, and you licks the back of it and then glues it on the letter.

MARY *(doubtfully)*. It doesn't seem very respectful to the good lady, does it, now?

JOHN. What's that, my dear?

MARY. To be licking the back of the Queen's head and pasting her on a parcel.

CALEB. Fantastic! *(Smiling.)* Fantastic enough to be one of my own lies...*(As if startled by the word.)* that is to say, my...uh...

MARY. Your lies, Caleb? Why, you're as honest a man as my own John!

JOHN *(beaming at her)*. Why, thank you, my dear.

CALEB *(the look of worry coming back on his face as he turns toward the shop)*. My lies to Bertha was what I meant. The lies I tell my poor blind Bertha...

(As CALEB mentions her name, the lights come up a little inside the shop area. In the shadowy old shop, with its worn workbench and peeling walls, a GIRL, sixteen or younger, sits quietly near the hearth, her

hands folded in her lap. Her face, in repose, has a still, waiting quality though her voice is warmly alive. Blind, she moves with a groping hesitancy.)

JOHN (*puzzled*). Well, now, Caleb...

MARY. Caleb, how can you call them lies? The stories you tell to bring a blind girl happiness?

CALEB (*his face lighting up*). You do not think so, then? I sometimes wonder that I do, whether it's right. When I tell Bertha how rich I am and what fine clothes I wear and how there's naught to worry a soul since I have my fine job making toys for Mr. Tackleton. (*Sighs.*) I do wonder sometimes what is real and what I've just thought up, like another toy. Like this strange new postal stamp on the letter... (*Suddenly he stops, taking a closer look at the letter.*) Why! Why, John, is this what it says, you think? The letter is for me?

MARY (*looking over his shoulder as JOHN nods slowly*).

Caleb, it is! I didn't notice, looking at the stamp.

CALEB. Dear me!

MARY. From Mr. Tackleton!

CALEB (*alarmed*). Oh dear, no! John, you wouldn't want to take it back, would you?

JOHN. I couldn't do that, Caleb. You'd best open it, I think.

CALEB (*eyeing it unhappily*). From Mr. Tackleton, is it? And why should he write me a letter when he lives but at the lane's end?

MARY. Why, yes, that's odd...that he'd write.

CALEB (*holding the letter as far away from him as he can*). I think I'd best wait and read it until...well, until... (*Seeing BOXER who's been waiting patiently with a*

parcel in his mouth.) Ah, the parcels! John, we'd best open them first. And then, the letter.

JOHN. The things are all there, Caleb. Every last bit and piece you ordered.

CALEB (*hastily putting the letter in his pocket*). I'm sure, I'm sure they are John, but...(*He pulls the letter out and starts to open it, then stuffs it back in his pocket.*) But we'd best check to be absolutely sure, you know.

MARY (*gently*). Caleb...are you expecting bad news from Mr. Tackleton by any chance?

CALEB (*guiltily*). Bad news? Oh no, not at all, not at all...(*He pulls the letter out of his pocket and hands it to MARY.*) But perhaps, at that, you'd be good enough to keep it for me? Until I'm through with the parcels? Bad news from Mr. Tackleton? Oh, not at all...I hope.

JOHN (*puzzling through it slowly*). Bad news from Tackleton...now, could it be? (*CALEB is hastily tearing the wrappings from a parcel.*) He's not dead surely...or he'd not be writing letters with the new postage stamps. (*To MARY.*) That's what made me so late today. So many people writing their Christmas letters with the new stamps, just to be putting them on their letters. (*With the proud air of a man who's just solved a deep mystery.*) That would be it, Caleb!

CALEB (*startled*). Eh? What's that?

JOHN. That would be it...the stamp. Mr. Tackleton wrote you the letter so he could use...

CALEB (*too quickly*). Oh, to be sure, that's it, John. It's a wise man you are.

MARY (*slowly*). It doesn't sound like Mr. Tackleton, somehow. And you don't really believe it, do you, Caleb? (*BOXER shakes his head.*)

CALEB (*trying to be cheerful*). Why, of course I do, my dear. I always believe my own lies. Oh, I mean to say...(*Holding up box he's just unwrapped.*) Well, well, you did get them, didn't you, John?

JOHN (*more and more bewildered by CALEB's manner*).

I always do, don't I? Doll's eyes you told me to pick up and doll's eyes I did pick up, just as always.

MARY (*looking in the package*). Aren't they lovely? So blue...they'll look beautiful in the dolls you carve, Caleb.

CALEB (*with a glance toward the shop, he sighs*). Aye. If only it were so easy to get new eyes for my poor Bertha. (*JOHN makes an awkward helpless gesture.*)

MARY (*gently*). Caleb...

CALEB (*quickly*). I know. And you're both so kind to her, to come each day, both of you. (*BOXER barks.*) Aye, you, too, Boxer! (*CALEB pats BOXER who sits down again, satisfied.*)

MARY. Come now, Caleb, you know our days would be empty without your Bertha in them.

CALEB. Ah, but you not only bring yourselves and the news of the village...you bring the supper, too.

JOHN (*embarrassed*). Oh, well now...(*He bends over to pick up another package. At the word supper, BOXER jumps to his feet, wagging his tail gaily.*)

CALEB (*his eyes lighting up as he watches BOXER*). John! Would you have the goodness to let me pinch Boxer's tail...oh, not hard, you understand...just enough to surprise him for a moment, maybe?

MARY. Why, Caleb, what a question! (*She touches BOXER reassuringly as he hides behind her.*)

CALEB. Ah, never mind. I can see he wouldn't like it. It's just that Mr. Tackleton has been wanting a new nut-

cracker for the Christmas trade. And he wants a barking dog for it. I thought perhaps if he would bark, I'd get it close to Nature, you might say. (*BOXER obligingly barks as CALEB watches.*)

JOHN (*as he retrieves another package*). Caleb...I found it!
CALEB (*poking it*). Ah, the wood for the nutcrackers, no doubt?

JOHN (*pointing to another package*). That's in there...

CALEB. Then it's the buttons for the toy soldiers' uniforms.

JOHN (*shaking his head and pointing to a small package*). In there.

CALEB (*after a puzzled moment*). John! It isn't...is it? (*Joyfully he begins to unwrap the package.*) You did! You found it at last! (*He pulls out a small silver harp.*) A lovely thing...if she could only see it!

MARY. Oh Caleb, Bertha will be so happy with it!

JOHN. It's quite a magical little harp, too, the man told me. You starts to play the strings and they goes right on and plays a tune.

CALEB (*hesitant, he starts to reach in his pocket*). What's the damage, eh?

JOHN (*brusquely*). I'll damage you if you inquire! It's Christmas, Caleb.

CALEB. It's like you to say so. I thank you, John. (*He begins examining the harp.*) Here we are! This little spring in the back... 'twill make it play all kinds of melodies...listen...(He runs his fingers across the harp strings. There is a soft melody of two or three bars. As they all smile delightedly there is the sudden loud chirp of a cricket.)

JOHN (*startled*). That's odd. It never did that in the shop!

CALEB (*peering closely at the little harp*). Dear me...I wonder...perhaps I might try it again? (*JOHN nods and CALEB again draws his fingers across the harp and the same few bars of melody sound, followed again by the chirp of a cricket.*) Dear me! A harp that plays like a cricket!

MARY (*bursts into laughter*). It's our Cricket, John! It must be. Sometimes, he hops into my pocket...(*She reaches carefully down into her pocket and looks into it. As she does a tiny green light flickers and the CRICKET chirps again. MARY laughs.*) Yes, there he is, snug as can be! (*As she reaches into her pocket she finds the letter, takes it out, and pats her pocket closed again over the CRICKET.*) Oh, and here's your letter, Caleb.

CALEB (*sighing*). I suppose...there are no more parcels I might open first?

JOHN (*slowly*). There's only the ham for Sunday supper and the box of buttons.

MARY. Why are you so afraid of the letter?

CALEB (*stops trying to pretend*). Mr. Tackleton. He...he's not been happy of late with my toys.

JOHN. Your toys sell by the box-load to the shops in London!

CALEB. I know, but...(*He opens the letter and reads it silently then then sits down on the steps, utterly dejected.*)

MARY (*going to him*). Caleb...

JOHN (*still slowly puzzling*). He could be dead, I suppose, but how could he write a letter then?

MARY (*exasperated by his slowness*). You know very well Mr. Tackleton is not dead! He's much too cross

and stingy to die! Even if he could write letters after.
(*To CALEB.*) Please...tell us what's wrong.

CALEB. I've...no job.

JOHN. No job? How can that be?

CALEB (*indicating the letter*). I feared it would come... perhaps that's why he wrote...to make it formal like with the good Queen's head on the envelope.

MARY. He wrote it because he didn't have the nerve to face you and say it, that's why!

JOHN (*thoughtfully*). Aye, but I don't see how he could do it!

MARY. Your toys are beautiful. The most wonderful, happiest toys in all England!

CALEB (*gloomily*). He's told me, Mr. Tackleton has, to make 'em more fearsome, or he'd have to let me go. Somehow, the tools turn in my hands to make the toys all laughing...(Turning to JOHN.) If only Edward were back from the golden lands across the seas. You've not heard from your brother, have you, John?

JOHN. Not in many a month. Nay, 'tis many a year by now...since he sailed away to bring you back the masks and dolls of the far Americas, and to make your fortune.

MARY. Edward will come back.

CALEB. He will, I know. A better boy never lived than your brother Edward. She misses him, Bertha does. Him so like the Sailor Prince he carved in the toy shop ...even to dressing up like the Sailor Prince himself so we could carve the toy just right.

MARY (*laughing*). I remember! And dancing the hornpipe just the way a sailor would! And John, trying to learn it, too!

JOHN (*laughing with her he jigs a few steps*). 'Tis not a dance for a clumsy fellow like me! (*Serious again.*) I always wondered, Caleb, if 'twere that, the dressing up in the costumes...that gave him the idea to sail away...

MARY. Why, John, what a wise man you are.

CALEB. Aye, it might have been. Always dressing up he was in some strange clothes to make us laugh. (*His hand strikes the little harp which lies beside him. Again the CRICKET chirps.*)

MARY. There he is again, our own little Cricket. Hear him? It will be all right, Caleb! Wherever the Cricket finds a hearth to make his home, he brings good luck.

JOHN (*nodding slowly*). That's so. Our Cricket has brought us all the good luck and happiness we could ask for. (*He smiles down at MARY.*) Though I'm not so sure it mightn't be Mary as does it.

MARY. John! I know! Oh, it will have to work. (*Turning to CALEB.*) We'll leave the Cricket on your hearth for Christmas and he'll bring you good luck, too!

CALEB (*smiling wistfully*). A Cricket on our hearth to bring us luck. It sounds so very pleasant. (*The CRICKET chirps and BOXER begins to bark. Within the toy shop, BERTHA hears the bark and rises, smiling. She doesn't move from the fireplace but stands quiet, waiting.*)

MARY. Hush, Boxer! We must go in. Bertha will hear Boxer and know we've come.

CALEB (*quickly, as he gathers up the parcels*). Not a word, now! Bertha mustn't know about my job. Or Mr. Tackleton. She thinks him kind as I've told her. Poor child, how will I care for her now?

MARY. Don't be worried. It will all work out, with the Cricket to help you.