

The Cricket on the Hearth



Doug Goheen

Adapted from the story by Charles Dickens (1845)

Norman Maine Publishing

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The Cricket on the Hearth

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For Michelle

The Cricket on the Hearth

HOLIDAY. A poor toymaker, Caleb Plummer, lives with his blind daughter in a tiny dilapidated home that is owned by his employer and landlord, the miserly Mr. Tackleton. To shield his daughter, Bertha, from the harsh realities of life, Caleb portrays their home as snug and cheerful and describes Mr. Tackleton as a kind, honest, and generous man. As a result, Bertha falls in love with Mr. Tackleton and is saddened upon hearing the news that Mr. Tackleton will be wed on Christmas Day to May Fielding. As Christmas nears, May becomes more distraught at the thought of marrying the much older Mr. Tackleton. But when a mysterious old gentleman appears on the side of the road just two days before Christmas, it proves to be like finding a cricket on the hearth—the luckiest thing of all.

Performance Time: Approximately 45-60 minutes.

About the Story

The Cricket on the Heart was published as a novella in 1845 and is the third of Charles Dickens' five Christmas books, the most famous of which is *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Dickens' other Christmas books include *The Chimes* (1844), *The Battle of Life* (1846), and *The Haunted Man* (1847).

Characters

(4 M, 5 F)

JOHN PEERYBINGLE: 40s, tall, rugged mail carrier.

MARY "DOT" PEERYBINGLE: 20s, John's short, plump wife.

CALEB PLUMMER: 40s, poor but high-spirited toymaker; wears ragged clothes and a worn sackcloth coat.

BERTHA PLUMMER: 20s, Caleb's blind daughter who makes dolls; wears ragged clothes.

MR. TACKLETON: 50s, Caleb's wealthy employer and landlord; a stern, miserly, callous man engaged to the much younger May Fielding; ugly, thin, and sharp-featured; wears a long green outer coat, boots, and a tall hat.

MAY FIELDING: 20s, unhappily engaged to Mr. Tackleton; Dot's girlhood friend.

MRS. FIELDING: 50s, May's fussy mother who approves of her engagement to the wealthy Mr. Tackleton.

TILLY SLOWBOY: 15, the Peerybingles' serving girl and nanny; a former foundling who is not particularly bright and has a tendency to speak of herself in the third-person.

EDWARD PLUMMER/OLD GENTLEMAN: A handsome young man who is Caleb Plummer's long-lost son but who has disguised himself as the Old Gentleman and is lodging with the Peerybingles; wears a long white wig, carries a walking stick, and wears a long shabby coat with pockets.

Setting

Christmas season 1850, London.

Set

Peerybingle home. A small, comfortable drawing room. There is a fireplace with a mantle and a clock hanging above it USC. There is a small chair next to the fireplace. There is a dining table and some small stools and a settee. The room has four doors. There are two doors on each side of the fireplace: one door leads to John and Dot's room and the other door leads to Tillie's and the baby's room. The two other doors include one that leads to the Old Gentleman's bedroom and one that leads to the outside. A rifle hangs on the upstage wall and there is a window.

Plummer home. Consists of a small set depicting the Plummer's living/work room that can be wheeled on from offstage and positioned downstage from the Peerybingle set. It is an impoverished room that is worn down and falling apart. A work table, bench, and Franklin stove are visible. Various shelves and stands accommodate a multitude of sundry toys: musical instruments, wooden figurines, Noah's Arks, and a great assortment of handmade dolls.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Drawing room of the Peerybingle home, December 23, twilight.

Scene 2: Plummer home, Christmas Eve, morning.

Scene 3: Drawing room of the Peerybingle home, Christmas Eve, evening.

Scene 4: Drawing room of the Peerybingle home, Christmas Day, early morning.

Props

| | |
|---|--|
| Baby carriage | Book |
| Kettle | Small rose tree wrapped in paper and moss |
| Coat, for Dot | Small box with tag |
| Candle holder | Dollhouse |
| Candle | Handmade doll |
| Assortment of boxes, parcels, packages | Sewing basket |
| Baby doll | Christmas tree |
| Coat and scarf, for John | Dishes and eating utensils |
| 2 Teacups | Cribbage board |
| Small basket | Wrapped wedding ring |
| Large round box | Wedding cake |
| Eyeglasses, for Old Gentleman | |

Special Effects

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Cricket chirping | Clock chiming six times |
| "Fire" blazing in fireplace | Baby whimpering |

"To have a cricket
on the hearth
is the luckiest thing
in all the world!"

—Dot

Scene 1

(AT RISE: London, 1850s. December 23, twilight. Lights come up on the drawing room of the Peerybingle home. The sound of a cricket chirping is heard. A "fire" blazes in the fireplace. A baby carriage rests nearby. A rifle hangs on the upstage wall. Momentarily, the clock above the fireplace chimes six times. Mrs. Mary Peerybingle "Dot" enters from outside carrying a kettle of water. She sets it on the fire, removes her outer clothing, and looks out a window. She returns to the fireplace and lights a candle on top of the mantle. Soon, Mr. John Peerybingle enters from the same door. He is carrying a number of parcels, which he deposits on the table. Dot hurries to help him. Throughout this opening scene, their great love for one another is most evident.)

DOT: Oh, goodness, John! What a state you're in with the weather!

JOHN: Why, y'see, Dot, it ain't exactly summer outside. So, no wonder.

DOT: I wish you wouldn't call me "Dot," John. I don't like it.

JOHN: (*Teasing.*) Why, what else are ya'?

DOT: You know what else I am, you lumbering beast. Mary is my name.

(*John crosses to the baby carriage.*)

JOHN: I've never known ya' to be anything but Dot, my lady, and so shall I call ye that.

(*Dot approaches the baby carriage and stares down at the baby.*)

DOT: Ain't he beautiful, John? Don't he look precious in his sleep?

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

DOT: Lord, John. Good gracious, no!

JOHN: Oh, I thought his eyes was generally shut.

(Baby awakens and starts whimpering.)

DOT: Well, no longer are they shut. You've woken him up now. *(Picks up the baby.)* You don't deserve to be a father, you don't. How should you know what little complaints children are troubled with, John?

JOHN: *(Removes his coat and scarf.)* No, it's very true, Dot. I don't know much about it. I only know that I've been fighting pretty stiffly with the wind tonight. It's been blowing northeast, straight into the cart, the whole way home.

(Tilly Slowboy, having heard the baby awaken, enters from the nursery.)

DOT: Poor old man, so it has!

JOHN: 'Twill be a white Christmas, for sure.

(Spies Tilly.)

DOT: *(To Tilly.)* Here. *(Hands Tilly the baby.)* Take the precious thing, Tilly, while I make myself of some use. Bless it, I could smother it with kisses, I could!

TILLY: *(Taking the baby. To Dot.)* She's got him now, Mum.
[Note: Tilly refers to herself in the third-person throughout.]

DOT: Only let me get the tea first, John. Then I'll help you with the parcels. *(Tilly sits in a small chair next to the fireplace and tends to the baby. Dot pours a cup of tea for John and takes it to him at the table. She then lifts a small basket resting under the table.)* Here's a clothes basket for the small parcels, John, if you've got any there.

(John starts sorting the packages as Dot returns to the fireplace to pour a second cup of tea. She then returns to the table and sits.)

JOHN: (*Indicating chirping cricket.*) It's merrier than ever tonight, I think!

DOT: And it's sure to bring us good fortune, John. It always has done so. To have a cricket on the hearth is the luckiest thing in all the world!

JOHN: 'Tis indeed.

DOT: The first time I heard its cheerful little note was on that night when you brought me home, right after old Judge Sampson joined us nearly a year ago. You recollect, John?

JOHN: Oh, yes. I should think so!

DOT: It seemed to say that you would be kind and gentle with me, and it spoke the truth, John. For you have ever been, I am sure, the most considerate, the most affectionate of husbands to me, your foolish little wife. It's been a happy home, John, and I love the cricket for its sake!

JOHN: Why, so do I, Dot.

DOT: I love it for the many times I have heard it in the night and the many thoughts its harmless music has given me. And when I sometimes feared our marriage might prove an ill-assorted one—I being such a child and you more like my guardian than my husband—its chirping gave me hope that you might learn to love me, and so has cheered me up.

JOHN: Learned to love ya'? How you talk! I had learnt that long before I brought ya' here to be the cricket's little mistress.

(Tilly giggles. Pleased with her husband's remark, Dot is nonetheless a bit embarrassed and turns to the parcels.)

DOT: So many parcels tonight, John.

JOHN: Why should this year be any different? The holiday approaches, y'know.

DOT: Tilly and I know that well, don't we, girl? What with all the baking and the many preparations.

TILLY: (*Proudly, to John.*) This mornin', sir, she helped with the rum cakes for tomorrow night!

JOHN: Did ya' now? (*To Dot.*) I won't be takin' many o' those.

DOT: Hush, John. We have no reason to grumble. And you have been delivering along the way?

JOHN: Oh, yes. A good many.

(Dot picks up a large round box.)

DOT: Why, what's this round box? Heart alive, John, it's a wedding cake!

TILLY: (*Excitedly.*) A wedding!

JOHN: Leave a woman alone to find that out.

DOT: Don't drop the baby now, Tilly.

JOHN: I called for it at the pastry cook's just this mornin'.

DOT: And it weighs I don't know what! Whose is it, John? Where is it going?

JOHN: Read the writin' on the other side.

(Dot reads it.)

DOT: (*Surprised.*) Why, my goodness, John!

JOHN: Who'd have thought it?

DOT: You mean to say that it's Tackleton the toymaker!

TILLY: (*Surprised.*) Tackleton!

JOHN: Takin' May Fielding for his wife then.

DOT: May Fielding! Why, she and I were girls at school together, John!

TILLY: Is it really to come about, sir?

(John nods.)

DOT: And he so old, and as unlike her! Why, how many years older than you is Tackleton, John?

JOHN: How many more cups o' tea shall I drink tonight at one sittin' than Tackleton ever took in four, I wonder?

(Dot seems dazed by the revelation and continues staring at the box.)

TILLY: Be there any more parcels, Mr. Peerybingle?

JOHN: That's all. Why, no, I...I declare. I've clean forgotten the old gentleman!

DOT: What old gentleman?

(John rises and starts to exit.)

JOHN: In the cart! Must be near froze t' death!

(John exits. Tilly rises and moves anxiously toward Dot.)

TILLY: He's talkin' of Ol' Scratch, Mum!

DOT: Don't be silly, girl. *(Rises and crosses to the door.)*
Though who this old gentleman is I'm sure I don't know.

(John enters, assisting the Old Gentleman, who has long, white hair and is dressed in a shabby long coat. He carries an old walking stick. Dot pulls up a small stool by the fireplace and motions to John to have the Old Gentleman sit.)

JOHN: You're an undeniable good sleeper, sir. *(Helps him to the stool.)* There! *(To Dot.)* That's the way I found him, sittin' by the roadside.

DOT: Sitting in the open air, John?!

JOHN: Gave me eighteen pence. Hopped in. And there he is.

(Dot reacts strangely to the Old Gentleman.)

OLD GENTLEMAN: *(Referring to Dot.)* Your daughter, my good friend?

JOHN: Wife.

OLD GENTLEMAN: Niece?

JOHN: *(Loudly so he can hear.)* Wife!

OLD GENTLEMAN: Indeed! Surely? Very young.

TILLY: (*Aghast.*) Mum!

OLD GENTLEMAN: (*To John, indicating baby.*) Baby yours?

JOHN: Aye.

OLD GENTLEMAN: (*Indicating baby.*) Girl?

JOHN: (*Loudly.*) Boy.

OLD GENTLEMAN: Also very young. (*Old Gentleman extracts from his coat pockets a pair of eyeglasses, which he then puts on. From another pocket he takes a book, opens it, and begins to read.*) Don't mind me now.

(*Knock at the door. John goes to answer the door.*)

TILLY: Who'll that be, Mum?

CALEB: (*From the door.*) Good evening, John. (*Enters and crosses to the table. To Dot.*) Good evening, ma'am.

DOT: (*Greeting him.*) Caleb.

CALEB: Good evening, Tilly. (*To John.*) Anything in the parcel line for me, John?

(*John retrieves from his coat pocket a small rose tree wrapped in paper and moss and gives it to Caleb.*)

JOHN: (*Indicating tree.*) There it is! Not so much as a leaf damaged. Full of buds!

CALEB: Ah, just the dear thing for my Bertha, now.

JOHN: Very dear at this season.

CALEB: Never mind that. It would be cheap to me, whatever it cost.

JOHN: (*Notices Tilly sniffing.*) Why, what is it, girl?

TILLY: Nothin', sir. Only she used to have such a rose tree at the orphanage every Christmas.

CALEB: And be glad y'ain't there anymore, miss, but was taken in by such a family here.

TILLY: That's just it, sir. That's why she's a-blubberin' here. She's just givin' so many thanks to have such a home...and such a family.

(Dot takes Tilly in her arms and comforts her.)

CALEB: *(To John.)* Anything else?

JOHN: A small box. *(Hands it to Caleb.)* Here you are.

CALEB: *(Reads tag.)* "For Caleb Plummer. With cash." *(To John.)* With cash? I don't think it's for me, John.

JOHN: *(Reads tag.)* "With care." Where do you make out "cash"?

CALEB: Oh, to be sure! It's all right. "With care," yes. Now, it might have said "With cash" if my dear boy in South America had lived, John. You loved him like a son yourself, didn't you, now?

JOHN: That I did, Caleb.

CALEB: But it's only me and Bertha now. And for her I give thanks, especially at this time of year. *(Looks again at the tag.)*

"With care," yes. It's a box of dolls' eyes for her work. I wish it was her own sight in a box, John.

JOHN: I wish it was, too. Or could be.

CALEB: To think she never sees the dolls, and them starin' at her all day long. That's where it cuts, my friend.

(Tackleton enters without bothering to knock. Tilly shrinks at his entrance. Tackleton spies Caleb.)

TACKLETON: *(To Caleb.)* Oh! You are here, are you? Wait a bit and I'll take you home. John Peerybingle, my service to you. More of my service to your lovely wife. Handsomer every day!

DOT: I should be astonished at your compliments, Mr. Tackleton, but for your condition.

TACKLETON: You know all about it, then?

DOT: I have only just heard. John has brought your wedding cake.

CALEB: *(Surprised.)* Heard what? Wedding cake?

TACKLETON: I'm to be married, man. In two days.

TILLY: Christmas Day!

JOHN: Why, that's our weddin' day, too!

TACKLETON: Don't I know that, Mr. Peerybingle! And it is for that reason I'm here. Tomorrow night's the evening of the great feast, is it not?

DOT: (*Anxiously.*) What?

TACKLETON: The gathering that Caleb and little what's-her-name, the idiot-girl, will be attending for the season.

JOHN: (*Evasively.*) Why...

TACKLETON: Yes, I thought so. I should like to join the party and bring May and her mother. I'll send over a leg of mutton or some trifle of that sort.

TILLY: (*Nervously.*) What?

TACKLETON: And we'll have the wedding cake after! We'll all make a comfortable appearance together.

CALEB: May Fielding?

TACKLETON: (*To Caleb.*) I have the fortune, Mr. Plummer, to marry a young wife, and a pretty wife. She honors and obeys, no doubt. (*To John.*) A little disparity, you know, but what's that in the long run, eh, Mr. Peerybingle?

TILLY: (*Quietly, to Dot.*) Mum?

TACKLETON: And I'll bring my wife-that-is-to-be along with her mother. It'll do her good. You're agreeable, then? (*All are too surprised to respond.*) Thankee! And now, I'm off. Goodnight, dear friends. Come, Caleb.

(*With an apprehensive glance at John, Caleb follows Tackleton out the door, leaving those remaining in a stunned silence.*)

OLD GENTLEMAN: (*Rises and speaks abruptly.*) I beg your pardon, friend, the more so, as I fear your wife has not been well. The bad night that made the shelter of your comfortable cart so acceptable is still as bad as ever. Would you, in your kindness, suffer me to rent a bed here?

JOHN: (*Hesitating.*) Well, I...

DOT: (*To Old Gentleman.*) Yes, yes. Yes! Certainly!

JOHN: (*Surprised by Dot's eagerness.*) Oh! Well, I don't object.

But, still, I'm not quite sure that—

DOT: Hush! Dear John!

JOHN: Why, he's stone deaf.

DOT: I know he is, but certainly...yes, certainly, he can stay here. (*To Tilly.*) Tilly, let me have the baby now. Go and show him the spare room and make him up a bed directly.

TILLY: (*Hesitantly.*) Yes, Mum.

(*Tilly gives the baby to Dot and escorts the Old Gentleman into the spare room. John sits at the table.*)

JOHN: (*To Dot.*) That old gentleman...he's an odd fish. I can't make him out. I don't believe there's any harm in him.

DOT: None at all. I'm sure there's none at all.

JOHN: Yes. I'm glad you feel so certain of it because it's a confirmation to me. It's curious he should have taken it into his head to ask leave to go on lodging with us, ain't it? Things come about so strangely.

DOT: So very strangely.

JOHN: However, he's a good-natured old gentleman, and pays as a gentleman, and I think his word is to be relied upon like a gentleman's. I had quite a long talk with him on the way home. He can hear me better already, he says, as he gets more used to my voice. He told me a great deal about himself, and I told him a good deal about myself, and a rare lot of questions he asked me. (*Notices Dot's pensiveness.*)

Dot! What are you thinkin' of?

DOT: What? Oh! Why, nothin', John. Nothin' at all... (*Approaches John and embraces him from behind.*) ...only how glad I am to be your little wife and to be here with you now.

(*Perplexed, John sits and the cricket resumes its chirping. Lights fade to black.*)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: *Plummer home, Christmas Eve, morning. Caleb is seated on a bench working on a dollhouse. His blind daughter Bertha sits on the floor next to him, sewing eyes onto a doll. The rose tree is visible nearby.*)

BERTHA: (*Referring to the doll.*) Look, Father. He is almost done. He only needs his eyes.

CALEB: He's an attractive lad. The baby will love him.

BERTHA: So you were out in the weather last night, Father, in your beautiful new blue greatcoat.

CALEB: In my beautiful new greatcoat, yes.

BERTHA: How glad I am you bought it, Father.

CALEB: And of such a tailor, too. Quite a fashionable tailor. It's too good for me.

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

CALEB: I'm half ashamed to wear it, though, upon my word!

BERTHA: Father, I am lonely in the dark. I want my eyes...my patient, willing eyes.

CALEB: Here they are...always ready. They are more yours than mine, Bertha, any hour in the four and twenty. What shall your eyes do for you, dear?

BERTHA: Look round the room, Father.

CALEB: All right. No sooner said than done.

BERTHA: Tell me about it again.

CALEB: (*Embellishing his description for Bertha's benefit.*) It's much the same as usual, homely but very snug: the gay colors on the walls...the bright flowers on the plates and dishes...the shining wood, where there are beams and panels...the general cheerfulness and neatness of the building all make it very pretty.

BERTHA: You have your working dress on and are not so gallant as when you wear the handsome coat?

CALEB: Not quite so gallant. Pretty brisk, though. (*Referring to the rose tree.*) With any luck, your little tree shall be bloomin' tomorrow.

BERTHA: Oh, Father, I love it so! I stood it close beside my pillow when I went to sleep last night and remembered it in my dreams. And when the glorious red sun—the red sun, Father?

CALEB: Red in the mornings and in the evenings, Bertha.

BERTHA: When the red sun rose, and the bright light came into the room, I turned the little tree toward it and blessed heaven for making things so precious and blessed you for sending them to cheer me!

CALEB: Shall I tell you a secret, Bertha?

BERTHA: If you will!

CALEB: While I was at the Peerybingles last night, Mr. Tackleton surprised us with droppin' in.

BERTHA: Mr. Tackleton? Our friend, Father, our benefactor! I never tire of hearing about him. You have told me of his generosity of spirit, his tenderness and kindness many times. His face so honest and true, I am sure. The manly heart that tries to cloak all favors with a show of roughness and unwillingness beats in its every look and glance, does it not, Father?

CALEB: (*Guilty at having deceived his daughter in this matter, too.*) Indeed it does, my dear. (*Pause.*) He's to be married to May Fielding on Christmas Day.

(*Bertha stops sewing.*)

BERTHA: Married?

CALEB: Took us all by surprise, I can tell ya that. Working for him all these years, I never would have guessed it. (*Notices the change in Bertha.*) Why, Bertha, what has happened? How changed you are, my darling.

BERTHA: Oh, Father! Oh, my hard, hard fate!

CALEB: But think how cheerful and how happy you have been, Bertha. How good, and how much loved by so many people.

BERTHA: That strikes me to the heart, dear Father. Always so mindful of me. Always so kind to me.

CALEB: To be blind, Bertha, my poor dear, is a great affliction, but—

BERTHA: I have never felt it. I have never felt it in its fullness. Never! I have sometimes wished that I could see you or could see him—only once, dear Father, only for one little minute—that I might know what it is I treasure and hold within me. And sometimes I have wept in my prayers at night to think that when your images ascended from my heart to heaven, they might not be the true resemblance of yourselves. But I have never had these feelings long. They have passed away and left me tranquil and contented.

CALEB: And they will again.

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

CALEB: She is, indeed.

BERTHA: (*Pensively.*) Her hair is dark—darker than mine. Her voice is sweet and musical; I well remember from our girlhood days. I have often loved to hear it. (*Pause.*) She is younger than he, is she not?

CALEB: Yes, he is older than May. But that don't signify.

(Bertha sits on the bench next to Caleb.)

BERTHA: Oh, Father! To be his patient companion in infirmity and age. To be his gentle nurse in sickness, and his constant friend in suffering and sorrow. To know no weariness in working for his sake. To watch him, tend him, sit beside his bed and talk to him awake, and pray for him asleep! What privileges these would be! What opportunities for proving all her truth and her devotion to him! Would she do all this, dear Father?

CALEB: No doubt of it.

BERTHA: I love her, Father. I can love her from my soul.

CALEB: Why, you can tell her so tonight.

BERTHA: Tonight?

CALEB: Old Tackleton means to bring May and her mother to the Peerybingles for Christmas Eve. Won't that be somethin', then?

BERTHA: *(Softly.)* Yes, Father. Yes, it will.

(Bertha rests her head on Caleb's shoulder. He looks uneasy as he puts his arm around her. Lights fade to black.)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: *Peerybingle home, Christmas Eve, evening. John and Caleb are putting up a Christmas tree. Near the fireplace, Tilly and Bertha are playing with the baby and the new doll Bertha has made for the baby. Dot is cleaning up after the evening meal. Tackleton is setting up a cribbage board at the table. May Fielding and Mrs. Fielding are sitting on a settee, tea in hand.*)

TILLY: *(To Bertha.)* He likes the new doll you've made for him, Bertha.

BERTHA: I finished just this morning. I'm glad the baby has taken to it. I can hear his cooing and gurgling.

TILLY: His eyes are just the same shade of blue as those you've given the doll.

DOT: *(Looks at Christmas tree.)* A beautiful tree, John and Caleb! The first for our little home!

CALEB: Seems so much bigger here inside than when we took her down this afternoon.

JOHN: Aye, the home is no match for the meadow when it comes t'open space.

(Dot kisses John on the cheek.)

DOT: *(As she tidies up the room.)* Well, it makes the place cheery, and I thank you both for your trouble.

CALEB: No trouble at all, Mary. And Bertha and I thank ye' for the lovely feast.

TACKLETON: I brought the mutton, you know.

DOT: Yes, Mr. Tackleton, we all know you brought the mutton.

TILLY: And she made the rum cakes they'll be havin' later on!

MRS. FIELDING: Who made the rum cakes?

JOHN: Why, Tillie herself did. And we'll be enjoyin' 'em soon enough!

(Dot has finished tidying up and joins May on the settee.)

DOT: Oh, May, my dear old friend! What a happiness to have you here!

MAY: Mother and I are so pleased to be here. You have such a lovely hearth and home. Oh, Mary, it has been so long.

DOT: Dear, what changes! To talk of those merry school days makes one young again!

TACKLETON: Why, you aren't particularly old, at any time, are you?

DOT: Look at my sober, plodding husband there. He adds 20 years to my age, at least. Don't you, John?

JOHN: Forty.

DOT: How many you'll add to May's, I am sure I don't know. *(Lightly.)* But she can't be much less than a hundred years of age on her next birthday! *(Tackleton utters a grudging smirk. To May.)* Only to remember how we used to talk at school about the husbands we would choose. I don't know how young, and how handsome, and how gay, and how lively mine was to be. And as to May's! Ah, dear! I don't know whether to laugh or cry when I think what silly girls we were! *(May shifts uncomfortably in her seat.)* Even the very persons themselves—real, live young men—we fixed on sometimes. We little thought how things would come about. I never fixed on John, I'm sure. I never so much as thought of him. And if I had told you, you were ever to be married to Mr. Tackleton, why, you'd have slapped me. Wouldn't you, May?

TACKLETON: You couldn't help yourselves for all that. You couldn't resist us, you see. Here we are! Here we are now, right, John? And old Judge Sampson will have May and me man and wife by this time tomorrow! And where are your gay, young bridegrooms now?

DOT: Why, some of them are dead. And some of them forgotten. Some of them, if they could stand among us at this moment, would not believe we were the same creatures

nor that what they saw and heard was real, and we could forget them so. No, they would not believe one word of it.

JOHN: Why, Dot!

(In a huff, Tackleton gets up and exits the house.)

TILLY: *(To Dot.)* Where will he be goin' then, Mum?

CALEB: Just outside, Tilly, to clear his head a bit. A man needs sometimes to be alone.

MRS. FIELDING: Girls are girls...and bygones, bygones. So long as young people are young and thoughtless, so shall they conduct themselves like young and thoughtless persons. I only thank heaven that May has always been a dutiful and obedient child, especially after we lost her father. I take no credit, of course, though we can all witness what a young lady she has become in the past few years with only my tutelage to guide her.

DOT: Any man would be fortunate to have May as his bride.

MRS. FIELDING: Mr. Tackleton is, in a moral point of view, an undeniable individual. That he will be a fine son-in-law no one in their senses can have any doubt.

DOT: Let me warm up your tea, Mrs. Fielding.

(Dot takes the cup and goes to the fireplace only to discover that the kettle is empty. She sets the cup down and puts on her coat. With kettle in hand, she prepares to go outside.)

JOHN: Here, now, woman! Let me get the kettle water. It's too cold.

(Dot starts to exit.)

DOT: No, John. You and Caleb finish up with the tree now.
(Exits.)

MRS. FIELDING: And the Fieldings, of course, have always been a family of gentility. Had certain circumstances

regarding the Indigo Trade happened differently, we might well have been in a position of great wealth. However, I shall not dwell upon the past, nor upon the fact that May had for some time rejected the suit of Mr. Tackleton before finally granting her consent, advised, of course, by me. As my own union has proved, those marriages in which there is the least of what is romantically called love are always the happiest. I anticipate the greatest possible amount of bliss. Not rapturous bliss but the solid, steady-going article from the nuptials to take place tomorrow.

(Tilly rises, holding the baby.)

TILLY: She's put 'im to sleep now. *(Indicating baby.)* She'll go and lay him down. *(Exits into the nursery with the baby.)*

MRS. FIELDING: *(Confused.)* What? What? Who's put what to sleep?

CALEB: The baby's wore out from all the festivities.

JOHN: And so am I from dealin' with this tree. Come, Caleb. *(Motioning him to the table.)* Let's have a game of cribbage now. Enough with the tree. It's fit for a grand day tomorrow anyway.

MRS. FIELDING: Well, tomorrow is the day for which I have expressly been living. And I don't mind saying that when it is all said and done, nothing would please me more than to be packed up and disposed of in any genteel place of burial. *(Yawns.)* Dear me! All this talk of sleep and rest, final or otherwise, has quite overcome me. *(Rises.)* I believe I shall retire for a few moments before May and I set out. I should have known...a big meal always overtakes one soon thereafter. Forgive me, gentlemen.

CALEB: Nothin' t' forgive, ma'am.

(Mrs. Fielding exits into the spare room.)

JOHN: (*Under his breath.*) Unless you count an overabundance of worthless talk.

(*Caleb chuckles. Bertha sits down on the settee with May. John and Caleb continue their cribbage game.*)

BERTHA: May, look into my face, dear one. Read it with your beautiful eyes, and tell me if the truth is written on it.

MAY: (*Takes Bertha's hands.*) Dear Bertha, yes!

BERTHA: There is not, in my soul, a wish or thought that is not for your good, dear May. There is not, in my soul, a grateful recollection stronger than the deep remembrance that is stored there, of the many, many times when, in the full pride of sight and beauty, you have had consideration for blind Bertha even when we two were children. Every blessing on your head! Light upon your happy course! Not the less, my dear May, because, today, the knowledge that you are to be his wife has wrung in my heart almost to breaking.

MAY: Why, Bertha!

BERTHA: Forgive me that it is so, for the sake of all he has done to relieve the weariness of my dark life, and for the sake of the belief you have in me, when I call heaven to witness that I could not wish him married to a wife more worthy of his goodness!

MAY: Worthy of his goodness? You speak of Mr. Tackleton?

BERTHA: The very one with whom you shall soon be joined. Father has so often told me of the great man's warmth—his generosity and his kind spirit.

(*May gives Caleb a curious look.*)

MAY: He is your father's employer?

BERTHA: And our gracious landlord as well. Rough though his exterior may be, he is an honest, and a tender, and a most

decent man. He will care for you, and you for him, through all your days together.

MAY: Yes, Bertha. (*Reflectively.*) All our days together.

MRS. FIELDING: (*Offstage, calls.*) May? May!

[END OF FREEVIEW]