

THE GHOST
BEFORE CHRISTMAS
By
Richard Thompson

*Based on “The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain”
By Charles Dickens*

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

© 2019, 2026 by Richard Thomas Thompson

CAUTION: Professionals and Amateurs are hereby warned that performance of **THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS** is subject to payment of a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of The United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth) and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including without limitation professional/amateur stage rights, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, all other forms of mechanical, electronic and digital reproduction, transmission and distribution, such as CD, DVD, the Internet, private and file-sharing networks, information storage and retrieval systems, photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved. Particular emphasis is placed upon the matter of readings, permission of which must be obtained from the Author in writing.

The English language stock and amateur stage performance rights in the United States, its territories, possessions and Canada for **THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS** are controlled exclusively by Next Stage Press. No professional or nonprofessional performance of the Play may be given without obtaining in advance written permission and paying the requisite fee.

SPECIAL NOTE

Anyone receiving permission to produce **THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS** is required to give credit to the Author as sole and exclusive Author of the Play on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof. The name of the Author must appear on a separate line, in which no other name appears, immediately beneath the title and in size of type equal to 50% of the size of the largest, most prominent letter used for the title of the Play. No person, firm, or entity may receive credit larger or more prominent than that accorded the Author.

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

For Kay

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

“We are telling Winter Stories — Ghost Stories or more — round the Christmas fire, and we have never stirred, except to draw a little nearer to it.”

— Charles Dickens

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

CAST: 8 Men, 6 women, 4 children (2m, 2f)
(in order of appearance)

The Man — mid-40s, working class.

Pericles Redlaw — mid-40s, Professor of chemistry

William Swidger — mid-40s, employed by that college.

“Mrs. William” (Millie) — mid-40s, William’s wife, loved by all.

Phillip Swidger — 87, William’s father.

The Phantom — A female spirit, late 20s-early 30s in life.

Spirit Redlaw — a conjuring of Redlaw in his youth.

Spirit Prudence — a conjuring of Redlaw’s sister, now dead, in her youth.

Spirit Longford — a conjuring of Robert Longford in his youth.

Andrew Tetterby — 30s, a hardworking newspaper seller

Mary Tetterby — His daughter, age 9-11.

Mick Tetterby — His younger son, age about 7 or 8.

Sally Tetterby — His younger daughter, age 5-6.

Mrs. Sophia Tetterby — 30s, Andrew’s wife.

Adolphus Tetterby — Andrew Tetterby’s teenage son.

Edmund Denham — Early 20s, a student of Redlaw’s.

George Swidger — upper 40s, Phillip’s oldest son.

The Child — 8-10, a boy street urchin.

Robert Longford — mid-40s, Denham’s father

Hannah Woolsey — 18, Denham’s fiancée.

Mrs. Warrick — late 40s, Hannah’s chaperone.

(*Note:* The following roles are doubled: The Man and William Swidger or The Woman and Mrs. William; Spirit Redlaw and Adolphus Tetterby; Spirit Longford and Robert Longford.)

TIME: December 22-25, 1856

PLACE: London, England

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

The Ghost Before Christmas was originally produced by the Twin Beach Players in North Beach, MD with the following extended participation cast (in order of appearance):

The Man	Rick Thompson
Pericles Redlaw	William Righter
William Swidger	Robert Sebo
Mrs. William (Millie Swidger)	Terri McKinstry
Phillip Swidger	Robert Rausch
The Phantom	Alexys Adams
Spirit Redlaw	Caleb Graves-Reher
Spirit Prudence	Sarah Mixon
Spirit Longford	Jack Mozingo
Andrew Tetterby	Aidan Davis
Mary Tetterby	Mary Evans
Mick Tetterby	Kaden Owen
Sally Tetterby	Alexandra Moyerman
Mrs. Sophia Tetterby	Katie Evans
Adolphus Tetterby	Seth Spangler
Edmund Denham	Ilya Jonas
Mr. Heathfield	Victor Villafaña
Mrs. Heathfield	Rose Jiménez
The Child	Charlie Villafaña
George Swidger	Caleb Graves-Reher
Mrs. Ralston	Teagan Smylie
Mrs. Nichols	Kathleen Mozingo
Robert Longford	Jack Mozingo
Hannah Woolsey	Sarah Mixon
Mrs. Warrick	Rose Jiménez
Carolers/Townspeople ...	Mary Evans, Michael Evans, Charlotte Garrett, Juliette Garrett, Sarah Mixon, Kaden Owen, Lacey Shreiner, Teagan Smylie, Seth Spangler, Audrey Stephanson

Director was Sid Curl. Producer was Rick Thompson. Assistant Director, Melissa Nikolaus; Music Director, Krista Garrett; Set Designer, Sid Curl; Lighting Designer, Ken Niemi; Stage Manager, Julia Mozingo; Costuming, Dawn Denison; Makeup, Wendy Cranford; Properties, Cara Brzozowski; Sound Design, Rick Thompson

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

ACT 1 SCENE 1

The stage is dimly lit. We can hear the strains of “Good King Wenceslas” and barely see a small room whose centerpiece is a wingback chair in which a middle-aged man is seated. He is dressed almost entirely in black. This is Victorian-era London: December 22, 1856. As the music ends, a pool of light appears downstage, into which steps a MAN who we will meet later as William Swidger (if “The Woman,” Mrs. William). He is a lower middle-class “everyman,” and acknowledges the season with a red coat.

THE MAN. Everybody said so. Now, far be it from we of the working class to assert that what everybody says must be true. Everybody is, often, as likely to be wrong as right. Everybody used to say that the sun revolves around the earth. Everybody used to say the earth was flat, and we’d fall off the edge if we journeyed too far. We know better today. True, everybody may on occasion be right, but that’s no rule, is it? So, what DID everybody say about Pericles Redlaw in that cold December of 1856? They said he looked like a haunted man, as if he had been, through his whole life, a friendless mark for the chafing and beating of the great deep of humanity. His lonely dwelling: two rooms in an ancient, beaten-down pile of a building squeezed on every side by a great city. Whether within or outside, he looked as though he had seen, I hesitate to speak the dread word, a ghost. Yes, everybody said Mr. Redlaw was a haunted man. Everybody was right. *(He exits and the lights come up. The room looks even grimmer than it did before. The entry door is stage right. A hallway to another room runs off a little stage left of center on the back wall. A small bookshelf is in the upstage right corner. There is the bare minimum of furniture: small dining table and chair, coat rack, etc. There is also a*

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

fireplace stage left, but the coal within it is giving out little heat now. There is a chair in front of it. Scattered around the room are the tools of this man's trade: bottles, beakers, and other laboratory items, for the occupant of this room is a teacher of chemistry. These are rooms normally provided to a junior instructor, which this man, PERICLES REDLAW, is not. The sole exception to the spartan dwelling is a painting of a beautiful young woman. It is in an expensive frame, complete with polished brass plate, and hangs above the fireplace. It is the only thing this man makes sure is lit well enough for him to look at whenever he desires. Redlaw finishes the book he is reading and, shaking his head and with a sarcastic snort, slams the book shut.)

REDLAW. Tiny Tim says "God Bless Us, Every One!" . . . TINY TIM SAYS, "GOD BLESS US, EVERYONE!?!?" What rubbish! What outright . . . *(Rising as he searches for the right word, then finds it.)* TRASH! Better things have been written by children of the lower classes! "Nicholas Nickleby" showed talent, but this is yet more dreadful than even "Oliver Twist." *(Holding the book like it's a stinky fish, he goes to the trash can at stage left, and drops the book into it. As he does . . .)* Christmas? THREE ghosts? A dying child? Balderdash! Humbug! The man should never write about children. They corrupt his writing gift. "God Bless Us, Every One" indeed! A pox on Tiny Tim! And all the other Cratchits too! *(He crosses to the painting and looks at it sadly.)* Sister, so long has the light you shone upon the world been extinguished. *(There is a knock at the door.)* Who's that? *(No answer.)* A reply requires exertions beyond your capacity? Then all right, come in! *(Using his foot to hold open the door, a man enters carrying a dinner tray. It is WILLIAM SWIDGER. As he enters, he takes care that the door closes quietly as possible.)*

WILLIAM. I'm humbly fearful, sir. It's a good bit past her time to return, and Mrs. William has been taken off her feet so often —

REDLAW. It has happened again, William? What was it this time?

WILLIAM. Air. Last week she tried a swing at the Peckham County Fair, when the wind acted on her like a sail on one of Her Majesty's ships, and down she went! But those are the elements. Mrs. William must be taken

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

out of them for the strength of *her* character to shine.

REDLAW. (*Bored with this conversation.*) Yes, I suppose that is true.

WILLIAM. Yes, sir. That's where it is, sir. My family, there are so many of us Swidgers. In fact, my father is a family in himself to take care of. Eighty-seven years old he is.

REDLAW. (*Distracted.*) Also true, William.

WILLIAM. You may call him the trunk of the tree. Then you come to his successor, my unworthy self and Mrs. William. Why with brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts and this relationship and that relationship, marriages and lyings-in, the Swidgers might join hands and make a ring around England! (*Redlaw is lost in deep thought, eyes closed. Thinking he's asleep, William purposely knocks a salt shaker off the table. Sure of his audience:*) Yes, sir. That's just what I say myself. Mrs. William and I have often said so. But sometimes, I wish she had a child of our own to love and cherish, for she is like an angel to father and me. I know that. (*A beat.*) Quite ready for the fowl and mashed potatoes, sir? Mrs. William said she'd follow in ten minutes when I left the lodge.

REDLAW. (*Gets up and pacing back and forth, stopping to look at the picture and then warm his hands at the fireplace.*) I am quite ready, though why should I dine? I have accomplished nothing this day. Christmas holidays may be joyous escapes for those who attend my courses, but for me they bring only memories, and the songs that remind me of what I wish not to remember.

WILLIAM. Oh sir, holidays are more than that!

REDLAW. True. They are a chance for those young men to forget what little chemistry they have learned the previous months.

WILLIAM. You must think of something happier, sir. Think of Mrs. William. She's been at it again.

REDLAW. She has been at what again?

WILLIAM. (*Checks the fireplace.*) Is it not surprising how the stone catches the flame to heat this frosty weather?

REDLAW. Yes, yes, of course. What is it that Mrs. William has done?

WILLIAM. What I always say myself, sir. There's a motherly feeling in Mrs. William that must and will come out.

REDLAW. I ask one more time. What has she done?

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

WILLIAM. Why, sir, not being satisfied with being a sort of mother to all the young gentlemen that come to attend your lectures — does the setting meet your approval?

REDLAW. It is a proper setting; huzzahs to your table-setting skill.

Enough of delay. What has Mrs. William done?

WILLIAM. That's exactly what I would say myself, sir, in your position. Get to the point! Indeed you are correct! That's exactly where it is! (*He pauses, to Redlaw's annoyance, then continues.*) Well sir, there ain't one of our students what doesn't regard Mrs. William as a sort of mother. Every day, they have all got something to tell her, or ask her.

REDLAW. No doubt complaining about the abuses of their not fully formed minds by the vile Professor Redlaw. Complaining about what is done as it should be done is the province of immaturity.

WILLIAM. Nothing of the sort, sir. They are unanimous in their praise of you. Hold you in high esteem, they do.

REDLAW. Pah!

WILLIAM. No sir, they ask of matters beneath your notice but important to them — and they value what opinion she has of them. I am told that “Swidge” is what they call Mrs. William among themselves. Not her proper name, but better to be called as such, if it's done in real liking, than to have your name made much of, and not cared about! They mean it with affection, they do!

REDLAW. I envy you that feeling, for it is one I have never had. And have no prospect of in the future. The time for such an opportunity has past. (*There is a knock on the door.*)

WILLIAM. That would be Mrs. William, sir. (*He goes to the door and opens it, allowing MRS. WILLIAM to enter carrying Redlaw's dinner tray. She is a simple, innocent-looking woman, happy in her station and pretty in a neatly-flowered skirt. She wears an apron and her hair is tucked neatly in a cap. She is accompanied by PHILLIP SWIDGER, William's 87-year old father, the “custodian” mentioned previously, the term being used in the meaning of “janitor.” He is carrying a batch of holly in his arms.*) Punctual, of course, Millie, or it wouldn't be you. (*He takes the tray from her and places it on Redlaw's table. Taking Mrs. William to the side of the room, he speaks softly.*) He looks lonelier than ever tonight, and ghostlier

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

also.

MRS. WILLIAM. It is the time of year. When students are not here, the loneliness throws its cloak over him. I fear his future is one of madness if we do not find a way to brighten his mind.

WILLIAM. As always, Millie, thinking of others.

REDLAW. What is it that the old man has in his arms? *(During the following, Mrs. William begins to decorate the room with the holly held by Phillip.)*

MRS. WILLIAM. Holly, sir. Four days before Christmas every year he decorates the living quarters of the resident students. *Three* days before Christmas every year he decorates the quarters of the teachers. Today is December twenty-second — three days.

REDLAW. Why not the masters first?

WILLIAM. That's what I say myself, sir. No reason for it. But whenever they appear, berries is so seasonal to the time of year.

MRS. WILLIAM. It has always been done that way, and customs of the season are a comfort.

REDLAW. Holly, marking another Christmas come, another year gone!

MRS. WILLIAM. It brightens the room, sir. The red, the green, the memories it brings to mind. Happy times, and even sad times, are worthy of remembering. Some . . . especially . . . that are sad.

REDLAW. Memories are only that — memories. Death erases them as it erases life. At the end, only names and dates remain. No blood, no spirit, no life. Only names and dates.

MRS. WILLIAM. But sir, there is happiness to remember also. You have done much good.

REDLAW. None worthy of notice! *(Turning to the old man.)* So, Phillip! *(Phillip gives Mrs. William the rest of the holly. She continues decorating the room during the scene.)*

PHILLIP. My duty to you, sir. Should have spoke before but know your ways, Mr. Redlaw — proud to say — and wait till spoke to. Merry Christmas, sir, and Happy New Year, and many of 'em. Have had a pretty many myself, and may take the liberty of wishing 'em. I'm eighty-seven!

REDLAW. Have you had so many that were merry and happy?

PHILLIP. Aye, sir, ever so many.

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

REDLAW. (*Speaking lower after crossing to William.*) Is his memory impaired with age? It is to be expected now.

WILLIAM. Not a morsel of it, sir. That's exactly what I say myself. There never was such a memory as my father's. He don't know what forgetting means. It's the very observation I'm always making to Mrs. William, sir, if you'll believe me.

REDLAW. (*Crosses to where Phillip is looking at a small sprig of holly.*) It recalls the time when those years were new, then, does it?

PHILLIP. Oh, many, many!

REDLAW. Were they merry and happy, old man?

PHILLIP. Oh, yes, yes!

REDLAW. What is the oldest you can recall?

PHILLIP. The first one I remember — a cold, sunshiny day it was — my mother told me the berries was food for the birds. I was a little fellow then, and thought the birds' eyes were so bright because the berries they lived on in the winter were so bright. I recollect that. And I'm eighty-seven!

REDLAW. That made it merry and happy then, your mother telling you about the birds?

PHILLIP. She was a blessed woman, but she took ill and died that Christmas time. The years have taken the picture of her face from me, but I remember about the birds.

REDLAW. Death at Christmas. Merry and happy indeed.

PHILLIP. Aye, I remember well how Christmas were in my school time. Year after year, all the merry-making. Oh, I was a strong chap then, Mr. Redlaw, and hadn't an equal at football within ten mile. Where's my youngest, William? Hadn't my equal at football, William, within ten mile!

WILLIAM. (*Automatically. He's heard this many times before.*)

That's what I always say, father! You are a Swidger, if ever there was one!

PHILLIP. His mother and I have sat among 'em all, boys and girls, little children and babies over many a year, when the berries like these were not shining half so bright all around us, as their bright faces. Many of 'em are gone. His mother, she's gone, and my son George — our eldest, her pride more than all the rest — is fallen very low. But I can see them when I look here in these branches, and they're alive and healthy, as they used to be in those days. I can see them young, in their innocence, thank God. It's a

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

blessed thing to me, at eighty-seven.

REDLAW. You, sir, obtain more than can be justified from a dying branch whose fruit only serves to make men retch and become loose in the bowels.

PHILLIP. I beg your pardon if I caused offense. I shall speak of something else.

REDLAW. Good.

WILLIAM. Father, we should leave and allow Mr. Redlaw the comfort of his meal. *(He takes Phillip's arm, attempting to lead him to the door.)*

PHILLIP. *(Breaking free.)* When I first come here to be custodian, which was upwards of fifty years ago, it was quite a pleasure to know that one of the learned gentlemen that helped endow us in Queen Anne's time left instructions in his will. There would be so much to buy holly, for garnishing the walls and windows come Christmas.

REDLAW. A meal can become cold.

WILLIAM. We are testing good Mr. Redlaw's patience, father.

PHILLIP. Freshening up the bare rooms with these branches and berries, it freshens up my bare old brain. One year brings back another, and that year another. There's many others. I'm eighty-seven!

REDLAW. Yes, and merry and happy, I am sure.

PHILLIP. So you see, sir, I have plenty to keep when I keep this present season. Now, where's my quiet Millie, my son's good wife? *(Mrs. William stops hanging holly and crosses to him.)*

MRS. WILLIAM. There's half the building to do yet, if the cold don't freeze us first, or the wind don't blow us away, or the darkness swallow us up.

PHILLIP. I hope you'll excuse me rambling on, sir. Chattering's the sin of my time of life. I'm eighty-seven. *(Phillip and Mrs. William cross to the door until:)*

REDLAW. Stay! *(Crosses to the table and sits.)* Spare another moment, Phillip. William, you were going to tell me something of your excellent wife's honor and kindness. What was it?

WILLIAM. Why, that's where it is, you see, sir —

MRS. WILLIAM. Husband —

WILLIAM. *(He stops and looks at his wife.)* Mrs. William's got her eye

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

upon me.

REDLAW. But you're not afraid of Mrs. William's eye?

WILLIAM. Why no, sir. That's what I say myself. It wasn't made to be afraid of. It wouldn't have been made so mild and kind, if that was the intention. My Millie, she's the works of Shakespeare compared with myself. The boy, the student down in the Buildings can attest, can't he, my love?

REDLAW. (*Rising with an upset look.*) Student? What student? They've all gone home to enjoy spending the days in dissipation when they could be put to better use in their studies.

MRS. WILLIAM. I didn't know that William had said anything about it, or I wouldn't have come. I asked him not to. It's a sick young gentleman, sir — and very poor, I'm afraid — who is too ill to go home this holiday season. He lives in a lodging unfit for a gentleman, down in the Buildings. That's all, sir.

REDLAW. Why have I never heard of him? Why has he not made his situation known to me? As my student I am responsible for him, and if he is going to die of an illness it will not be while he is in my charge. Give me my hat and coat. (*William starts to do so.*) What house? What number?

MRS. WILLIAM. Oh, you mustn't go there, sir!

REDLAW. Not go there?

MRS. WILLIAM. Oh dear, no! It couldn't be thought of.

WILLIAM. What she means, sir, is the young gentleman would never have made his situation known to one of his own sex, but Mrs. William has got into his confidence. They all confide in Mrs. William; they all trust her. A man couldn't have got a whisper out of him, but woman and Mrs. William combined . . .

REDLAW. There is good sense in what you say, but if he is to be ill he should be at home. (*He puts his money purse in Mrs. William's hand, holding his finger to his lips.*) I have no use for it this time of year.

MRS. WILLIAM. Oh dear no, sir! Worse and worse! Couldn't be dreamed of! He says that of all the world he would not be known to you, or receive help from you even though he be a student in your class. I have not made terms of secrecy with you, but do not let him think I have betrayed him to you!

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

REDLAW. Who would think that of you? The thought is unworthy. If perfection of heart exists on this earth, you have it. But why should the student not be known to me? Why?

MRS. WILLIAM. Indeed I can't tell, sir. I only wanted to be useful in making things neat and comfortable for him, and employed myself that way. But I know he is poor, and lonely, and I think he is somehow neglected, and at Christmas time, too!

REDLAW. Hmm. What more about him?

MRS. WILLIAM. He believes himself engaged to be married, but has not received her father's permission. So he studies to prove his worth and receive her father's approval. I have seen for a long time that he has studied hard and denied himself much. (*Looking around the room.*) How very dark it has become!

PHILLIP. And colder as well. There's a chill and dismal feeling in the room. William, my boy, turn the lamp and rouse the fire.

REDLAW. No. Chill and dark suits my feelings. Is there more, Mrs. William?

MRS. WILLIAM. He muttered in his sleep yesterday about someone dead, and some great wrong done that could never be forgiven. But whether to him or to another person, I don't know. Not *by* him, I am sure.

WILLIAM. You see what it was my intention to say? If she was to stop till the New Year after this one, she has done him worlds of good. All at home, just the same as ever — my father made snug and comfortable, not a crumb of litter to be found in the house.

MRS. WILLIAM. Enough of this. You'll turn my head and you'll have to cook for yourself!

WILLIAM. Mr. Redlaw asked what I meant to say, and I'm going to say it. Not content with this, on her way home this very night she brings home a young child, more a wild beast than a child, mind you, found shivering on a door step. What does she do, but dries it, feeds it and keeps it. Even now it's sitting by our chimney, staring at the flames — unless it's bolted. No, a wild animal cannot be tamed by only food and shelter. It takes time and loving — but if anyone can do it, I say proudly it is Mrs. William.

REDLAW. (*Applauding, touched at William's pride in his wife.*) Hear! Hear! Well said! Heaven keep her happy! And you, too, Phillip! And you,

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

too, William! I'll not detain you any longer now. Good night!

PHILLIP. I thank ye, sir, I thank ye! William, you take the lantern and go on first, as you did last year and the year afore that. *(To Redlaw.)* Ha! I remember — though I'm eighty-seven. "Lord, keep my memory green!" It's a very good and pious prayer, sir! Lord, keep my memory green! Amen! Amen! *(Phillip, William and Mrs. William all exit, with William in the lead carrying the lantern. Redlaw remains standing, deep in thought. He goes to the painting.)*

REDLAW. A student. Still here. Still in my charge. Still my responsibility. Sister, I always valued your counsel in such matters. Ah, of course, of course. Tomorrow I must search him out. Now to dinner. *(He goes to the table, where his dinner has been placed, sits down and takes a mouthful.)* Cold. If I were hungry it would matter. Were I to have the warm memories I envy of old Phillip, or William of his loving wife, then perchance it would matter. But none of that. My life has been merely a balance of tragedy against the blessings enjoyed by others. *(He rises and walks to the painting.)* Did we not have happy memories? Why have they been overcome by those of loss, disappointment and despair? And of what good are those memories of your sickness and death? What use? "Keep my memory green" indeed! Better those evil memories should be struck out, wiped away, turned brown as kindling and burned! *(Turning from the painting, he checks the time on his pocket watch, takes another book from the shelf and returns to the winged back chair. He starts reading, but his head soon droops into sleep. The book falls from his lap and onto the floor. The lights dim low as a cold wind starts to blow. We hear a few etherial bars of "Still, Still, Still" on a piano. Then a clock starts chiming the hour. One, two . . . The lights fade back up to full. The clock continues chiming. As it does, the door slowly opens by itself [see production note], revealing the figure of a young woman. She is THE PHANTOM. Her face is pale and her clothes are various shades of gray, but not in any way shabby. Her steps are measured and deliberate as she walks to Redlaw's side, standing silently as the chimes reach twelve. Feeling her presence, Redlaw awakens.)*

REDLAW. You are here again.

THE PHANTOM. I am here again.

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

REDLAW. I see you in the fire that warms me. I hear you in the music that soothes my ears. I feel you in the wind, and in the dead stillness of the night. *(a beat)* Why do you come, to haunt me so?

THE PHANTOM. I come as I am called.

REDLAW. No. I have not bidden for you to come. Indeed, I bid you go and never return.

THE PHANTOM. Unbidden you may say, but bidden I am. It is enough. I am here.

REDLAW. I have not bidden a spirit, and I have not called for you to haunt me. Only a foolish man will ask for such a thing.

THE PHANTOM. No, it is a foolish man who will send away one bearing a gift without learning what the gift might be.

REDLAW. Gift? What gift? You have invaded my sleep and darkened my waking hours. That is no gift. That is the work of a thief, stealing my rest and my sanity. *(The Phantom crosses in front of Redlaw's chair, stopping just before the painting on the wall. Redlaw stands and moves opposite, facing away.)* I ask again, Who are you and why do you haunt my days?

THE PHANTOM. The first is of no importance. The second will become clear in time. I come to speak of a man, neglected in his youth, and miserably poor, who strove and suffered, until he carved out knowledge from the libraries where it was buried, and ascended rugged steps of learning.

REDLAW. He is one like me. I have traveled that same difficult path.

THE PHANTOM. No mother's self-denying love, no father's advice and counsel, aided him. Nay, a stranger came into his father's place when he was but a child, and he was soon foreign to his mother's heart. His parents, at the best, were of that sort who cast their offspring loose early, as do the birds who push their children from the nest, to fly or fall to earth on their own. If their children do well, they claim the credit, and if not, the pity. Do you know him?

REDLAW. No, I do not. Please, I bid you go.

THE PHANTOM. *(During the following, The Phantom walks slowly to Redlaw's chair, and crosses behind it, going back and forth.)* Not yet. My story continues. In this struggle upward, he found a friend. In time, they became close. They worked together, side by side. The love and

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

confidence of his earlier youth had found no expression, until he bestowed it all on this friend. Except that given to his sister. (*Pointing to the portrait.*) She is before me. (*Her hand sweeps across to the door, where SPIRIT REDLAW and SPIRIT PRUDENCE enter. All the spirits are younger versions of the characters. They close the door.*)

REDLAW. Dear God!

THE PHANTOM. Do not be frightened. They are but shadows of your past, and harmless.

SPIRIT REDLAW. For the moment, you will live here. I know of our parents' nature, and made provisions for you.

SPIRIT PRUDENCE. I will not be a burden, I promise. For now, I will assume the tasks of preparing meals and keeping your home. (*She starts setting the table for dinner and we hear an old-style door knocker.*)

SPIRIT REDLAW. Ah, that is my friend. (*He goes to the door and welcomes SPIRIT LONGFORD, leading him toward the table. Spirit Prudence crosses to meet them.*) Prudence, may I present my dearest friend, Mr. Robert Longford. Mr. Longford, my sister Prudence Redlaw.

SPIRIT PRUDENCE. (*With a curtsy.*) I am most pleased to meet you, Mr. Longford.

SPIRIT LONGFORD. (*Bowing.*) The pleasure, and the honor, are mine, Miss Redlaw. (*Spirit Redlaw stays where he is, while Spirit Prudence and Spirit Longford stroll to near the door, and all three freeze. The Phantom crosses to Spirit Prudence and Spirit Longford.*)

THE PHANTOM. (*Indicating Spirit Longford.*) The friend, this man named Longford, did he love her? He may have, once. No, I am sure he did.

REDLAW. Say no more! Let me forget it! Let me blot it from my memory!

THE PHANTOM. Then a love, as like hers, arose in your heart, yet you loved the fair object of your affection far too well to express it. Instead, more than ever, you strove in your life to climb. Only an inch gained, you thought, brought you something nearer to the height wherein you might be worthy of my — (*Hand to chest.*) excuse me, I pray, for my mind wandered — you might be worthy of *her* love. Unknown to you, she had spoken to your sister of her favorable attitude toward you. (*Spirit Prudence*

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

breaks freeze and crosses to Spirit Redlaw.)

SPIRIT PRUDENCE. Brother, you must speak to Joanna. Make your feelings known. She does not know the pictures of the future you see. You have told me of them.

SPIRIT REDLAW. Yes, I see them in my dreams each night.

SPIRIT PRUDENCE. Then tell Joanna of them. It is the man's place to speak of such things first. For a woman to do so is not ladylike. *(They freeze.)*

THE PHANTOM. Yes, the pictures you saw! Pictures of your life with one you had grown worthy of. Pictures of your sister, made the wife of your dear friend. Pictures of you and your loving wife, your sister and her loving husband, creating a glorious panorama binding all of you and all of your children in a radiant garland. Pictures —

REDLAW. That were delusions, for I feared rejection and said nothing to her. There was no Joanna; there were no children.

THE PHANTOM. But the pictures still live.

REDLAW. Yes. They come back to me in music, in the wind, in the dead stillness of the night, in the revolving years. *(Spirit Prudence breaks freeze and crosses back to Spirit Longford. They embrace and turn to face Spirit Redlaw, who crosses to the couple showing obvious approval. As he does:)*

THE PHANTOM. Your friend, braving the chance of rejection, won your sister to himself. Better had your sister loved him less — from the shallower depths of a more divided heart. For in her sickness, in her hour of need . . .

REDLAW. Please, show me no more!

THE PHANTOM. *(Considers for a beat, then:)* Very well. *(She waves a hand and all three spirits leave the way they came, backing out the door and closing it.)*

REDLAW. Enough recounting the tale of my unhappy life. What is this gift you bring? Or is it a curse, another unhappy memory to increase my burden?

THE PHANTOM. In time. In time. After my story is completed. Those glorious pictures of warmth and love were, as you rightly say, delusions. You, having done nothing to make your dream become real, lived from then a life barren of love. Your sister, doubly dear, doubly cheerful, lived

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

on to see your old ambition in work rewarded, and then — you continue.

REDLAW. Died. Died, gentle as ever; and with no concern but for her brother and the husband who had abandoned her. (*His anger becomes gradually more intense.*) With her last breaths, she forgave him. I cannot. Robert Longford will live forever in my condemnation and hatred. (*He pauses, gathering himself. The Phantom says nothing.*) My sister is remembered, her light so well remembered that the memory of it has extinguished mine. Even now it has not returned. Ach! Nothing is more idle than memories of a boyish hope. My life became work, and work, my life. A solitary existence.

THE PHANTOM. Sorrow comes to all, and to the young it comes with bitterest agony. I have thought of it with sympathy. Even now.

REDLAW. Sometimes I wonder when her heart first inclined to him. But that is nothing. Early unhappiness, and a loss that nothing can replace, outlive such fantasies of happiness and family . . . and Joanna.

THE PHANTOM. A fantasy if not pursued is a sorrow and a wrong. As your sister told, it is unseemly for a lady to speak of such matters first to a gentleman. It is the gentleman who must speak, and the memory of such a failure is for him a curse. If I could forget such sorrow, I would.

REDLAW. Yes, I too! If I could forget my sorrow, I would! Why must I always have that taunt in my ears? My life is darkened by that repeating whisper, (*a beat*) “If I could forget my sorrow, I would!”

THE PHANTOM. It is an echo.

REDLAW. If it is an echo of my own thoughts, why should I be tormented? This is not a selfish thought; I extend it to all. All men and women have their sorrows, most of them their wrongs — in all parts of life. Who would not choose to forget them?

THE PHANTOM. Indeed, who would not be happier and better for it?

REDLAW. Those years, what in fact do they recall? Are there any minds in which they do not bring back some sorrow, or trouble? What are the memories of the old man who was here tonight? Sorrow and trouble.

THE PHANTOM. (*With a smile.*) Ordinary and unenlightened minds do not feel or reason on these things. That is for men of higher cultivation and more profound thought.

REDLAW. In your words I hear an echo of my own mind.

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

THE PHANTOM. Receive it as proof that I am powerful. You have heard my story. Who I am remains unimportant. Are you ready to hear the gift I offer?

REDLAW. Yes, though I dread what it may be.

THE PHANTOM. There is nothing to dread. My gift is what you have desired. (*She pauses, then:*) I offer you the forgetting of all the sorrow, wrong, and trouble you have known.

REDLAW. Forget them? All?

THE PHANTOM. I have the power to cancel their remembrance. There will be only confused traces that will die out soon. Say “Make me forget,” and it is done.

REDLAW. Wait! I suspect there is more to the bargain. I would not deprive myself of any kindly recollection or any sympathy that is good for me, or others. What shall I lose if I accept? What else will pass from my mind forever?

THE PHANTOM. You will lose no knowledge, no result of study. Nothing but the twisted chain of feelings and associations, each in its turn dependent on, and nourished by, the banished recollections. Only those will go.

REDLAW. How many are they?

THE PHANTOM. They have been what you remember with despair, showing themselves in the fire, in the music, in the dead stillness of night, bringing you only anguish. Consider. (*The Phantom slowly crosses to the door, and turns.*) The time has come! Decide! Before the opportunity is lost.

REDLAW. A moment more. I call on Heaven to witness that I have never been a hater of any kind. But, if there be poison in my body, should I not, knowing of medicines and how to use them, indeed use them? If there be poison in my mind, and through this fearful shadow I can cast it out, shall I not cast it out?

THE PHANTOM. Enough talk! You were silent before; say now! Is it done? IS. IT. DONE?

REDLAW. A moment longer. Forget these memories! Have I not thought that in my loneliness? Has it not been the thought of thousands, generation after generation? All human memory is stained by sorrow and trouble, but

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

other men have not had this choice. Yes, I close the bargain. Yes, I will forget my sorrow, wrong and trouble!

THE PHANTOM. Say it! Is it done?

REDLAW. It is! Make me forget!

THE PHANTOM. *(She nods slowly.)* It is done. And take this with you, man whose troubled memories I have banished. The gift I have given you, you shall give again, wherever you shall go.

REDLAW. And how shall I give this to others? I have not the powers you possess. Do I burn incense? Make a ceremony?

THE PHANTOM. Where is it written that giving must be accompanied by ritual and proclamation? Is it not true that asking public acclaim for generosity is unworthy of a gentleman? No, you have but to approach and speak, and the gift is passed without the other's knowledge. Indeed, are not the best gifts those received when the giver is unknown?

REDLAW. Approach and speak? Only that and the gift is given?

THE PHANTOM. Only that. Passing on this gift is the province of one who has discovered that the memory of sorrow, wrong and trouble is the lot of all mankind, and mankind would be happier in its other memories without it.

REDLAW. Yes, men have been driven to insanity upon such memories. They leave behind them the awful legacy of widows' tears, the blighted hopes of children, with a catalog of suffering, misery and woe, too long to be enumerated and too painful to be contemplated.

THE PHANTOM. *(Raising her hand as in a benediction.)* Then go! Let your wisdom be mankind's benefactor! Free it from such unhappy recollection. From this hour carry the blessing of such freedom with you. Go! Be happy in the good you have won and in the good you will do! *(The door opens on its own as she starts to exit, finishing the line from offstage.)* Memories of sorrow and suffering — destroy their like in all whom you approach! *(The door closes behind her. Redlaw is alone.)*

REDLAW. Have I seen what is truly real, or have I in my recollection of sorrow passed into hallucination and madness? *(He crosses to the painting.)* Sister, remember our times in the playground? Remember the Christmases where we raised joyous voices in the choir? Remember our first dances, you pointing me to girls I should ask to dance, me telling boys

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

you were playing girlish tricks to avoid their glances when your feminine goal was their companionship upon the dance floor? Those memories, all happy until . . . until . . . until . . . what? (*Realizing.*) I do not remember. Praise be to all that is good! I do not re-mem-ber! Oh what a fabulous gift I have been given. I must, in the spirit of this blessed season, go out into the world and unselfishly share it! Phantom, good bearer of this wonderful gift, I shall follow your instruction. I shall be the benefactor of all mankind! Memories of sorrow and suffering beware: I shall destroy you in all whom I approach. (*Now at stage center.*) Man and woman, boy and girl, young and old, wealthy and impoverished, believers and even they who are heathen — ALL whom I approach! (*The lights fade out and “O Christmas Tree” is heard.*)

SCENE 2

Morning, December 23. The lights come up on a small parlor in “The Buildings.” As Mrs. William said, it is not worthy of a gentleman. There is a table for eating, with stools around it. The main “decoration” on the stage right wall is a flat wooden board with bits of newspaper tacked onto it. There is one lamp near another stool. The hallway now contains stairs running off stage left, leading to the room that will be shown in the following scene. This is the home of ANDREW TETTERBY, who is seated on the stool. His clothes are mismatched and cheaply made. He is trying to read his newspaper in spite of his children’s interruptions. This place is grimmer than even Redlaw’s. In Redlaw’s case, however, it is by choice. Here it is by poverty. Three children — son MICK and daughters MARY and SALLY (the youngest) — are playing noisily with a ball. Mary’s throw bounces past her father. She is something of a tomboy.

ANDREW. (*affectionately*) Children! Have you no feeling for your poor father after the fatigues and anxieties of a hard winter’s day? I have worked since five o’clock this morning. Must you make a ballyard of your home and maniacs of your parents? Must you?

MARY. It’s too cold outside. The ball gets lost in the snow if Sally

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

doesn't catch it. Then we have nothing at all.

SALLY. I'm not good at catching. But I can find!

MICK. But when she finds in the snow, her hands and dress get wet. So we play inside.

ANDREW. *(rising)* I ain't fit to deal with you. You make my head go round, and it gets the better of me. *(He hugs all three.)* Mick, isn't it enough that your dear mother has provided you with two sweet sisters, without you trying to make boys of them? Play your games, and let them be what they are meant to be. Two boys in a family is boys enough without you getting Sally into boys' play as you have Mary. You and 'Dolphus must take care of your sisters. *(Directed at Mary and Sally.)* And they have the way of girls to learn! Now scat — play outside! *(Mick gets a playful pat on the behind as he exits through the door. Mary also starts out, but:)* Not you, Mary. Your mother will be home soon, and will need your help in preparing dinner. It's a skill that will serve you well. And you, Sally, your mother brought you a book and you should be reading it. Now off with you both!

BOTH. Yes father! *(Mary exits dejectedly through the hall, turning SR to the kitchen. Sally exits running in the same direction.)*

ANDREW. My little woman herself could hardly have done it better! I only wish she was here, I do indeed. What's got her? And 'Dolphus, too. He's late and will come home like a lump of ice. The sun may shine but it warms nothing. *(He returns to his newspaper. After a moment, SOPHIA TETTERBY enters through the door, with ADOLPHUS TETTERBY and Mick in tow. She is carrying various items that will make up dinner. Adolphus is into his teen years, and has been at work to help support the family).*

SOPHIA. Why have you sent Mick out to play in this cold? D'ye not know the wind is merciless?

ANDREW. I know it well, woman! I have stood hours at Marble Arch selling newspapers to the gentlemen who read them in the comfort of their warm offices and warm homes. There weren't no shelter from the wind on Oxford Street!

SOPHIA. I have lost three children, and will take no chance of losing more. All of you take care of each other, or never look me in the face

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

again. Mick, go and warm yourself. (*Mick exits up the stairs.*)

ANDREW. (*Changing the subject.*) Are you wet, 'Dolphus my boy? Come and take my chair and dry yourself.

ADOLPHUS. No, father. I ain't very wet, I don't think. Does my face shine much?

ANDREW. Well it *does* look waxy, son.

ADOLPHUS. The foul weather. What with rain, and sleet, and wind, and snow, and fog, my face gets to have a rash sometimes.

ANDREW. Go and warm yourself. You put in a day's work, and earned the rest. Your mother will call when dinner is ready. (*Adolphus exits the same direction as Mick.*)

SOPHIA. Ah, dear me, dear me! That's the way the world goes.

ANDREW. Which is the way the world goes, my dear?

SOPHIA. Oh, nothing. (*Andrew goes back to his chair and newspaper.*) Ah, dear me, dear me! That's the way the world goes.

ANDREW. My duck, you said that before. Which is the way the world goes?

SOPHIA. Oh, nothing.

ANDREW. You said THAT before, too. My little woman, what has put you out?

SOPHIA. I don't know. Don't ask me. Who said I was put out at all? *I* never did!

ANDREW. I see. Hard times, and hard weather, and hard work, make it trying. When the world goes that way, it appears to go the wrong way, and looks to choke you.

SOPHIA. Don't speak to me for the present, or take any notice of me. Don't do it! (*A few moments pass, then.*) I am better now. (*She punctuates it with a laugh.*)

ANDREW. Are you quite sure you are better? Or are you about to break out in a new direction?

SOPHIA. You see, Andrew, this being Christmas time — when all those who can, make holiday, and all who have got money, spend some — I did get a little out of sorts when I was in the streets. There were so many things, such delightful things, but there was so much calculating necessary before I lay out sixpence for the commonest things. I saw all those other

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

faces and began to think whether I might have done better, (*She begins wringing her hands.*) and been happier if, I, hadn't —

ANDREW. Married at all? Or married somebody else?

SOPHIA. Yes, that's what I really thought. Do you hate me now, Andrew?

ANDREW. Why, no. I do not.

SOPHIA. I have not told you the worst. I can't think what came over me. I don't know whether I was ill, or mad, or what it was, but I couldn't think of anything that seemed to bind us to each other. All the pleasures and enjoyments we had ever had, they seemed so poor and insignificant. I hated them, and I could think of nothing else, except our being poor.

ANDREW. Well, my dear, that's the truth. Yes, we are poor, and yes, there are a number of mouths to feed at home here. Knowing the truth of your life and sometimes envying those of a higher and more comfortable station is natural.

SOPHIA. Oh, but Andrew! When I had been home a very little while — how different! All of our struggles, all of our cares and wants, all of the times of sickness and even the loss, all of it spoke to me and said we are one, and that I never might 'ave been, or could 'ave been, the wife and mother that I am. (*She hugs Andrew and starts to cry.*)

ANDREW. No need for tears, my love. I have often imagined such things myself as I stood in the cold rain at Marble Arch.

SOPHIA. Then the cheap enjoyments I hated so cruelly, got to be so precious that I couldn't bear to think how much I had wronged you, and 'Dolphus and Mary and Mick and little Sally, and my lost Arthur, Edward and Henry. How could I ever have the heart to think these things? How could I? (*There is a knocking at the door.*)

ANDREW. Who knocks?

REDLAW. (*From offstage.*) My name is Redlaw. I come from the old college nearby. A young gentleman who is a student there lodges in your house. I have come to see him.

ANDREW. Come in. His room is — (*Sophia screams in horror and points at Redlaw as he enters.*)

SOPHIA. Look at that man! What does he want?

ANDREW. My dear, what's the matter? How you shake!

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

SOPHIA. I saw that man in the street, when I was out just now. He looked at me, and stood near me. I am afraid of him.

ANDREW. Afraid of him? Why?

SOPHIA. I don't know why I — (*Andrew walks toward Redlaw.*)

Husband, stop!

ANDREW. What may be your pleasure with us, sir?

REDLAW. I regret that my coming in has alarmed your good wife.

ANDREW. My little woman says, perhaps you heard her say it, that it's not the first time you have alarmed her tonight.

REDLAW. I am sorry. I remember to have observed her, for a few moments, in the street. I had no intention of frightening her. (*He goes near to Sophia before speaking.*) I am sorry to have frightened you.

SOPHIA. What is it that is going away from me again? What is this that is going away? (*Her expression abruptly changes from horror to peace, and she stands unmoving, as if in a trance.*)

ANDREW. Are you ill, my dear?

SOPHIA. (*Brightly, with a sudden movement.*) Ill? No! I am quite well. Very well!

REDLAW. (*Turning to Andrew.*) The young gentleman, he does lodge here?

ANDREW. Mr. Denham?

REDLAW. Yes, . . . Mr. Denham. I have wondered at his absence from classes.

ANDREW. The gentleman's room is upstairs, sir. There is a private entrance but it will save your going out into the cold if you'll take this little staircase, if you wish to see him.

REDLAW. Yes, I wish to see him. Is there a lantern?

ANDREW. I'll light you, sir, if you'll follow me. (*He stops, and sits on the stairs.*)

I'm sorry, sir. My head is a little light. Must be the exertions of the day.

REDLAW. (*Taking the lantern.*) I do not wish to be accompanied or announced. I would rather go alone, as he does not expect me. I'll find the way. (*He exits up the stairs.*)

SOPHIA. (*She comes to the steps.*) Are you ill, husband?

ANDREW. I just felt a moment's faintness, but it has gone. (*He stands,*

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

puts his arm around her, and then with the same expression as his wife earlier:) No! I am quite well. *Very well!* *(They stand arm in arm with strangely happy expressions as the lights fade out and “Patapan” is heard.)*

SCENE 3

Immediately after. This is a small room, using only the stage left area. No stairs can be seen in the hallway as this is the top floor. Cheaply rented, it contains only a bed, a wood chair and a table. Its occupant, EDMUND DENHAM, is in the bed. His appearance confirms that he is a student, one barely hanging on financially. The bed covers are rumpled, because he is ill and has been in it for a while. He is facing away from the room’s entrance. Redlaw comes to the doorless entrance and knocks on the wall.

DENHAM. *(Not looking up.)* Is that my kind nurse? I need not ask, for there is no one else who would come here.

REDLAW. *(Redlaw enters.)* I would, and did.

DENHAM. *(With a start, and sitting up.)* Mr. Redlaw!

REDLAW. I heard, by accident, that one of my class was ill and solitary. Receiving no other description of him, other than he lived on this street, I began my inquiries at the first house in it. And I have found you, who have been not in my classes these many days.

DENHAM. I have been ill, sir. An attack of fever — of the brain, I believe — has weakened me, but am greatly better. I cannot say that I have been solitary, or I would be forgetting the kind hand that has been near me.

REDLAW. You speak of the keeper’s wife, Mrs. Swidger.

DENHAM. Yes.

REDLAW. I remembered your name when it was mentioned downstairs just now, and I recall your face, but we suddenly had no personal communication. I ask you, why? How comes it that you have sought to keep me from knowing you remain here, ill, and at this season when all the rest have returned home?

DENHAM. Because you have discovered my secret.

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

REDLAW. Secret? What secret? I know of no secret.

DENHAM. Your manner to me has become different from the ways that endear you to your students. Your changed voice and your looks are a warning that you know me. But Mr. Redlaw, as a just and good man, think how innocent I am, except in name and descent, of participation in any wrong done you or any sorrow you have suffered.

REDLAW. Sorrow? Wrong? What are those to me?

DENHAM. I beg you, do not let these few words change you like this. Let me pass from your knowledge and notice. Let me occupy a distant place among those you instruct. Know me only by the name I have assumed, and not by that of Longford, which is —

REDLAW. (*Turning away.*) Longford!

DENHAM. The name my mother took when she might have taken one more honored. I refuse to have it. My mother was told only that he had a wife before, and of her death. I am the child of a second marriage and, as in the first, my father abandoned us when we came upon hard times. But I had already heard him speak of you, the brother of his first wife, with honor and respect, indeed almost reverence. As a poor student now, from whom could I learn but you? (*He gets up and starts toward Redlaw.*)

REDLAW. Don't come nearer to me! I must consider what to do.

DENHAM. (*He returns to the bed and sits.*) Our ages and positions are now so different, sir, that I wonder at my past presumption. I have meant no harm, but for anything unworthy in this fraud I have done, please forgive me, and for all the rest forget me!

REDLAW. The past is past. It dies like the flowers in winter. Who talks to you of its traces in my life? What have I to do with your distempered dreams? (*He throws a money pouch on the bed.*) Here. If you want money, there it is. I came to offer it, and that is all I came for. There is nothing else that brings me here. There *can* be nothing else, and yet —

DENHAM. Take it back, sir. (*He holds the money pouch out to Redlaw.*) I wish you could take it from me. And, with it, the remembrance of your words and offer.

REDLAW. You do?

DENHAM. I do. (*Redlaw crosses to him, takes the moneybag, and looks Denham in the eye.*)

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

REDLAW. There is sorrow and trouble in sickness and life, is there now?

DENHAM. *(As if hypnotized.)* Yes.

REDLAW. In its unrest, in its anxiety, in its suspense, in all its train of physical and mental miseries? All best forgotten, are they not?

DENHAM. *(Now alert.)* Yes, best forgotten!

MRS. WILLIAM. *(From the hallway.)* A gentleman is with him, is there?

REDLAW. Mrs. William. I wish that she not know I am here. It might influence her good feeling toward you. *(Mrs. William knocks in the hallway.)* Ah, this is idle foreboding.

DENHAM. Then I shall let her in.

REDLAW. No! I will see her later. For now, hide me! *(Denham hides him behind a curtain.)*

DENHAM. Come in, madam. *(He sits on the bed as Mrs. William enters carrying a basket.)*

MRS. WILLIAM. *(Looking around.)* Dear Mr. Edmund, they told me there was a gentleman here.

DENHAM. There is no one here but I.

MRS. WILLIAM. There has been someone?

DENHAM. Yes, there has been someone, but he is gone now.

MRS. WILLIAM. *(After leaning over and touching his forehead.)* Are you quite as well tonight? Your head is not so cool as in the afternoon.

DENHAM. There is no cause for concern. Very little ails me. *(Mrs. William looks over the room, checking that everything is as it should be, then sits down and takes some fabric from her basket. She starts working on it.)* What is that?

MRS. WILLIAM. It's the new muslin curtain for the window, Mr. Edmund. It will look very clean and nice, though it costs very little, and will save your eyes from the light. My William says the room should not be too bright just now, or the glare might make you giddy. Are the pillows comfortable? *(She rises to fix them.)*

DENHAM. *(Curtly while pushing her away.)* Leave them alone. You make too much of everything.

MRS. WILLIAM. I have been thinking how true the saying is that adversity is a good teacher. Health will be more precious to you than it has ever been. Years from now, when you remember these days, the memory

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

of your illness and loneliness will make your home twice as cherished and your loved ones twice as much a blessing.

DENHAM. Yes, yes. No doubt.

MRS. WILLIAM. I am very different from you, Mr. Edmund, for I have no learning and don't know how to think properly. As you have been lying ill, I have seen you so touched by the kindness and attention of the people downstairs. I have felt that you thought that some repayment was in order. I have read it in your face, as plain as in a book. But if there was no trouble and sorrow we would never know half the good there is around us.

DENHAM. We needn't magnify the merit, Mrs. William. The people downstairs will be paid in good time for any little extra service they have rendered me. Perhaps they anticipate no less. I say I am much obliged to you, but why weaken my sense of what is your due by making enormous claims upon me? Do you think I have been dying a thousand deaths?

MRS. WILLIAM. (*Offended and surprised.*) Do you believe, Mr. Edmund, that I spoke of the poor people of the house with any reference to myself? To me?

DENHAM. Oh! I think nothing about it. I have had . . . (*Looking for the fancy word to show his superiority.*) . . . a slight illness, which your solicitude — (*Condescending, with almost a sneer.*) by which I mean "kindness" — makes a great deal more of than it merits. It's over. We can't continue it. (*He picks up a book, leans back and starts to read, ignoring Mrs. William. After a moment:*)

MRS. WILLIAM. Mr. Edmund, would you rather be alone?

DENHAM. There's no reason why I should detain you here.

MRS. WILLIAM. There is the curtain. It is —

DENHAM. Not worth staying for.

MRS. WILLIAM. (*Quiet but passionate. She can only be pushed so far.*) If you want me, I will come back willingly. When you did want me, I was quite happy to come. You must be afraid I will be troublesome to you, but there is no danger of it, for you owe me nothing. My only purpose is to help in your return to good health. If you suspect me of making much of the little I have tried to do to comfort you, you do yourself more wrong than ever you can do to me. That is why I am sorry. That is why I am very sorry. (*She exits the way she came. Redlaw comes out of hiding.*)

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

REDLAW. How can you treat her in such a way? She, whose only wish is to improve your health and surroundings.

DENHAM. Why should I treat her any other way? In time she will be paid.

REDLAW. And in time she will refuse it. You have learned so little. I say, when sickness lays its hand on you again, and may it be soon, die here! Rot here! *(Redlaw exits.)*

DENHAM. *(After a moment.)* What change has come over me? What have you done? *(Shouting after Redlaw.)* What curse have you brought upon me? What spell have you cast? GIVE ME BACK MYSELF! *(The lights fade out. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is heard.)*

SCENE 4

Immediately after, downstairs at the Tetterby's parlor. As before, the hallway has stairs. The children have come back, and are now playing hide and seek. Sally is "it." Mr. Andrew Tetterby has returned to his newspaper, and his wife is cleaning.

SALLY. *(Looking behind a box, and finding Mick. Loudly:)* Tag! You're it!

MICK. Am not! Am not! You looked! You cheated!

SALLY. Did not!

MICK. Did too! *(As Redlaw appears at the foot of the stairs, he stands unnoticed as Mary comes out from her hiding place behind her father's chair.)*

MARY. Yes you did! I saw you! You cheated. *(There is a melee of children shouting "Did not!" and "Did too!" until:)*

ANDREW. *(Bellowing.)* That's enough of this! Enough I say! *(Redlaw becomes more confused and concerned at what he sees.)*

SOPHIA. *(Same volume.)* This place is inconvenient and small enough without you making noise. Be off with you! Up to bed!

SALLY. But mother, we have not had supper.

SOPHIA. And you will not have it tonight. And you will not have

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

breakfast tomorrow if you do not leave this room now!

ANDREW. (*Angrily, but normal volume.*) I work long hours, standing in the cold and wind at Marble Arch, watching those “gentlemen” look at me with contempt as they grab the newspaper and slap tuppence into my hand. I deserve quiet at home to relax and enjoy what little time I have. (*Loud again.*) And I shall have it!

SOPHIA. Or you shall be hungry and cold outside if you cannot give it! Now be gone! (*The children, thoroughly cowed, quietly exit. Redlaw comes down the last step and crosses to the door, watching Andrew and Sophia.*)

ANDREW. (*Happily, scowling expression changing instantly.*) Ah! Mr. Redlaw, did your visit with Mr. Edmund go well?

REDLAW. (*Quietly, as he accelerates toward the door.*) Yes, yes, very well. (*Before he reaches the door, Sophia catches him.*)

SOPHIA. Glad we are, glad indeed! We have shared what we had of pleasures and enjoyments with him, for we wish to be worthy of such a gentleman as he, and a student of yours at that.

ANDREW. (*Joining her. They now flank Redlaw*) Aye, he was not forgotten at meals, and received his rations on bread, and meat, and gravy. We do not wish to be called greedy, but did he tell you when it might be that he pays us for our generosity?

SOPHIA. Why just today he received his portion of a lovely roast leg of pork, with seasoning and gravy, oh yes, a great deal of that, as much as he wanted.

ANDREW. So when might our modest accounts be improved?

SOPHIA. Be plain, husband. When shall we be paid?

REDLAW. (*Breaking from them, pulling coins from his pocket.*) Here! Take it! I meant to help him but he has refused it! Take these coins and may they bring you the same satisfaction they have brought me — none! (*Redlaw bolts for the door and exits as the Tetterbys throw themselves to the ground and collect the coins, laughing, as the lights fade out. “What Child Is This” is heard.*)

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

SCENE 5

Immediately after, on the street outside. Rushing in stage right, Redlaw stops still, troubled at what he has seen inside the Tetterby house.

REDLAW. How can this be happening? I made their memories of sadness and sorrow disappear, so why does their happiness and good cheer suddenly turn to foul temper and greed? And why does everyone I have seen turn away from me as if I carry a dread disease? *(There is the sound of a small child crying.)* Who is that? Come out from there. Show yourself. *(A young boy covered with dirt crawls out from behind a box stage center. THE CHILD is small, his clothes a bundle of tatters. He has no shoes. While his eyes are bright, they are not youthful. He is a child who has never had a childhood and who is on the path to becoming a man-shaped animal. Redlaw takes a step toward him.)*

THE CHILD. *(Baring his teeth.)* I'll bite if you hit me!

REDLAW. I have no reason to hit you. You are the only one who does not shrink from my glance. Tell me your name. *(Redlaw takes another step toward the Child, who bolts like a feral cat. Redlaw catches him by the clothes.)*

THE CHILD. Let me go! I've done nothing to you! Let me go!

REDLAW. No! What is your name?

THE CHILD. Got none. Let me go!

REDLAW. All right, Got None. Where do you live?

THE CHILD. Live! What's that?

REDLAW. You need food and shelter. Where do you receive that?

THE CHILD. Nowhere.

REDLAW. A child should not be alone, cold and hungry on the street — not in this blessed season. I will not allow it. Come with me.

THE CHILD. No. *(After a moment, he stops struggling, curious.)* Come where?

REDLAW. To the home of Mrs. William. Mrs. William's home is a warm place where you will be fed.

THE CHILD. *(Back to struggling.)* No.

REDLAW. Come with me and I'll give you money.

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

THE CHILD. *(Stops again.)* How much will you give me?

REDLAW. More shillings than you ever saw, and then I will bring you back to this box if you wish, and you may continue your life among those who are very miserable or very wicked. I know of neglect, and I know of being alone. Child, I desire to do you good. Do not run from me. Please.

THE CHILD. Will you let me walk by myself, and never hold me or touch me?

REDLAW. Yes.

THE CHILD. And let me go before, behind, or any ways I like?

REDLAW. *(Releasing him.)* Yes.

THE CHILD. Give me the money first. Then I'll go. *(Redlaw gives him four coins.)*

REDLAW. Come with me. *(He goes a few steps stage left, stops, turns, and motions. The Child hasn't moved.)* We made a bargain. Come with me. *(The Child does so as the lights fade out. "The Holly and the Ivy" is heard.)*

SCENE 6

Early evening, the parlor of the Swidger home. Since William is employed by the college at better pay, this home is a cut above the Tetterbys', but not at the same level as Redlaw's. The furniture is a little better than the Tetterbys', and is better decorated for the season. It fills stage right. There is a knocking at the door. No one answers, and the door opens. Redlaw and The Child stand in the doorway. There is no one visible at home. There is also not a sound.

REDLAW. Child, stay outside until I call you. *(Loudly.)* Pardon my entering unannounced. I knocked but no one . . . *(Normal volume, to The Child but really to himself.)* Where is the family? I can feel that sorrow, wrong and trouble haunt this place. *(Reassuring himself after events at the Tetterby home.)* One who brings the forgetting of such things can do no harm. *(Phillip Swidger comes into the light from stage left. Redlaw closes the door, leaving The Child outside.)*

PHILLIP. Mr. Redlaw, this is like you, sir! You have heard of it and

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

come to render any help you can. But it is too late for you to help. Come. Follow me. *(The lights counterfade from stage right to stage left as they cross. In this room is a bed with a sick man in it. He is GEORGE SWIDGER. Both William and Mrs. William are there, for this is a death watch. Mrs. William is deep in prayer, head down and eyes closed, kneeling or seated by the side of the bed.)*

REDLAW. Who is this man?

PHILLIP. My son George, Mr. Redlaw. My eldest son, who was more his mother's pride than all the rest.

REDLAW. Is that he, William?

WILLIAM. That's what I say, myself. Why should a man ever go and gamble, and the like of that, and let himself down inch by inch till he can't be made any lower?

REDLAW. Has he done so?

WILLIAM. Just exactly that, sir, as I'm told. It's enough to kill my father.

REDLAW. *(To himself.)* Only yesterday I observed the memory of this old man to be a tissue of sorrow and trouble. Are such memories as I can drive away, so precious to this dying man that I need fear for him? No! I will proceed.

WILLIAM. What did you say, sir?

REDLAW. Nothing. I was deciding if it was within my power to be of help.

GEORGE. Father!

PHILLIP. *(Kneeling by the bed.)* My boy! My son George!

GEORGE. You spoke of my being mother's favorite, long ago. It's a dreadful thing to think of.

PHILLIP. No, no! Think of it. Don't say it's dreadful. It's not dreadful to me, my son.

GEORGE. It cuts you to the heart.

PHILLIP. Yes, it does, but it does me good. It's a heavy sorrow to think of that time, but it does me good. Think of it too, and your heart will be softened more and more. Your mother loved you dearly to the last, and with her last breath said, "Tell him I forgave him, blessed him, and prayed for him." Those were her last words to me. I have never forgotten them, and I'm eighty-seven.

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

GEORGE. I am dying, father. I am so far gone that I can hardly speak, even of what I most want to say. Is there any hope for me beyond this bed?

PHILLIP. There is hope for all who are softened and penitent. I was thankful, only yesterday, that I could remember you as an innocent child. It is a comfort now to think that even God has that memory of you.

GEORGE. Oh, the waste since then. The waste of life since then!

PHILLIP. *(To Redlaw.)* He was a child once. He played with children and said his prayers before sleep. I saw him do it many a time.

GEORGE. My breath is short. My time is very short.

PHILLIP. *(Looking up.)* Oh Father in Heaven, so much more afflicted by the errors of thy children, take this wanderer back — not as he is, but as he was then. Let him cry to thee, as he has so often seemed to cry to us!

GEORGE. *(Lifting himself up on one arm.)* The man who was just here. Who is it?

WILLIAM. *(Leaning over him.)* It's Mr. Redlaw. He is here.

GEORGE. I thought I had dreamed of him. Ask him to come here.

(Redlaw does so.) I have been so ripped up tonight, sir, by the sight of my poor old father, and the thought of all the trouble I have caused, and all the wrong and sorrow lying at my door, that what I can do right, I'll try to do.

REDLAW. You have sorrows and troubles. Are they not best forgotten?

(Turning to the rest. Mrs. William remains in prayer with eyes closed.) Are not all your sorrows and troubles best forgotten? *(They are all frozen, trance-like except for the sound of Mrs. William softly praying. George is the first to break it as he struggles to stand. Mrs. William stops praying when he does.)*

GEORGE. I feel . . . Why, damn you! What have you been doing to me here? I have lived bold, and I mean to die bold! To the devil with you! *(He grabs his chest, turns and falls onto the bed. There is silence, then:)*

MRS. WILLIAM. He is gone.

PHILLIP. *(Quickly standing, as if nothing had happened.)* Where's my boy William? William, come with me to the pub. We'll drink. *(At this, Mrs. William gasps, and rises from her kneeling position.)*

MRS. WILLIAM. Drink? Are you going to leave your own son?

PHILLIP. *(With a sneer.)* Son? Where is my son?

REDLAW. *(Turning away.)* Merciful God, no! Let it not be happening

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

again!

MRS. WILLIAM. Where? Your son, your first born, is here! (*Pointing at the bed.*)

PHILLIP. That's no son of mine. No such wretch as that has any claim on me. My children are pleasant to look at, and they wait upon me. They get my meat and drink ready, and are useful to me. I've a right to it! I'm eighty-seven!

WILLIAM. You're old enough to be no older. I don't know what good you are. We could have a deal more pleasure without you!

PHILLIP. (*To Redlaw.*) My son and his childless wife! They talking to me of *my* first son! Why, what have they ever done to give me any pleasure?

WILLIAM. What have you done to give any pleasure to me or my dear wife, who has served you faithfully for too many years! I am glad we have no children! Better to not bring any more such as you into this world!

MRS. WILLIAM. William, no!

WILLIAM. (*To Redlaw, who is growing ever more horrified.*) I'm whipped if I can see anything in him but a calendar of ever so many years of eating and drinking, and making himself comfortable, over and over again.

REDLAW. Your mind is enraged, William. Please stop. Please think of the season, of the spirit of Christmas, the generosity — (*William exits with his wife hurrying after him. At the same time Phillip spins Redlaw around.*)

PHILLIP. (*Raving.*) I'm eighty-seven, and I don't know as I ever was much put out by anything. I'm not going to begin now, because of what he says is my son. He's not my son. I've had a power of pleasant times. I recollect once — no, I don't — no, it's broken off. It was something about a game of cricket and a friend of mine, but it's somehow broken off. I wonder who he was. I suppose I liked him. I wonder what became of him. I suppose he died, but I don't know. (*He starts laughing.*) And I don't care, neither. I don't care a bit!

REDLAW. Please Phillip, sir, please stop this!

PHILLIP. (*During Redlaw's line he has been rummaging through his pockets. In one, he finds a small holly branch.*) Berries, eh? Ah, it's a pity they're not good to eat. I recollect, when I was a little chap about as high

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

as that, (*His hand at the midpoint between knee and waist.*) and out walking with — let me see, who was I walking with? — no, I don't remember as ever I walked with anyone in particular, or cared for anyone, or anyone cared for me. (*Getting steadily more crazed.*) Berries, eh? There's good cheer where there's berries. Well, I ought to have my share of it, and to be waited on, and kept warm and comfortable. (*Closing on Redlaw, who backpedals.*) I'm eighty-seven and a poor old man! I'm eighty-seven! I'm eighty-seven! (*Redlaw turns and runs, grabbing The Child as he passes through the doorway on his way out of the house. Phillip keeps repeating "I'm eighty-seven" and laughing maniacally as the lights fade out. "Lullay Thou Little Tiny Child" [The Coventry Carol] is heard.*)

SCENE 7

Late evening, Redlaw's room at the college. The Child sits by the fireplace as Redlaw paces. At one point he comes close to The Child.

THE CHILD. Don't touch me! You brought me here to take my money!

REDLAW. And this is the one companion I have left on earth! (*There is a pounding on the door. In a panic:*) Who's that?

MRS. WILLIAM. (*Shouting and equally panicked from outside.*) It's I, sir. Pray let me in!

THE CHILD. It is Mrs. William, who has fed me.

REDLAW. (*Not letting her in.*) What is the matter?

MRS. WILLIAM. William's father has turned childish in a moment. The shock has been too sudden for him. William himself is also changed. I cannot understand him; he is not like himself. Oh, Mr. Redlaw, please help me!

REDLAW. No! No! No!

MRS. WILLIAM. Mr. Redlaw, William has been muttering about the death of his brother. I fear he will kill himself. I can do nothing to help him.

REDLAW. Better he should do it, than you come near me!

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

MRS. WILLIAM. Help! Let me in. He and his father have both been your friends. How shall they be followed, how shall they be saved? They are changed and there is no one else to help me! Please Mr. Redlaw! Please help me! I don't know what to do. Please help me! Please! *(Redlaw says nothing, putting his hands on his ears to block the noise. The Child goes to open the door, but Redlaw stops him by stamping loudly on the floor. Eventually the pounding on the door and pleas for help stop.)*

THE CHILD. She has gone.

REDLAW. Yes. You should go also.

THE CHILD. Why can't I stay here?

REDLAW. Because she will care for you. I cannot. A man with no wife is foolish to believe he can act a father, and I am becoming not a man but an animal. With me you will suffer neglect, not the love that is due a young child. You will become *me*. No, follow her. Go quickly and stop nowhere on the way! *(The Child crosses to the door and exits. Redlaw locks it behind him, then takes a volume from the bookcase, opens it and reads aloud.)* "In the material world, nothing can be spared. Not an atom in the wondrous structure can be lost without a blank being made in the great universe." *(To the painting as he crosses toward it.)* Sister, my own foolishness has brought me to this. I know, now, that it is the same with good and evil. Yes, a blank is made in the universe. The young student, Denham, said to me, "Give me back myself." How I wish that *I* could be given back myself! I am infected, and carry a plague. I have taken poison for my own mind, and where I felt interest, compassion, sympathy, I am turning into stone. I leave behind me a path of ruined lives, as anger and selfishness spring up in my footsteps. My reward is that in the moment of their transformation I can hate them. I have become like Midas, who found his golden touch to be a golden curse. *(Turning back toward the closed door.)* Phantom, punisher of impious thoughts, come back and haunt me day and night, but take this gift away! Or if you will not, then deprive me of giving it to others. Undo what I have done. I have spared good Mrs. William from this gift, and will not allow myself to spread it to her. I will never go forth again, but will die here with no hand to tend me. *(He crosses back to the painting of his sister.)* Sister, you were all that was good on this earth. Help me. Help me before it is too late. I feel the change

THE GHOST BEFORE CHRISTMAS

happening in me. Busy streets are to me a desert, and the people around me are a mighty waste of sand. But those traces within me that the Phantom said will soon die out, are not yet in their graves. I know that is true, for I have sent the child to where he is better off. I know what I was before, what I have become, and what I have made of others. *(He realizes with a start.)* Except the child. He is penniless, hungry and destitute, and yet I have made no change to him. He has something which makes him immune to the disease I spread. A blessing for him, and I must not corrupt it by seeking him out, no matter how much I wish it. No, better he live in filth and be completely beaten down than live in comfort near me. I am powerless to help him. *(Turning back to the painting.)* Sister, as an angel your prayer must be more worthy of the Creator's notice than that of one who caused so much anguish as I have. I beg you, sister. Pray for my deliverance. Tell me, what am I going to do? *(As if in answer, the locked door slowly opens by itself. Redlaw turns to face the sound. Standing in the doorway is The Phantom.)* You are here again. Why?

THE PHANTOM. I am bidden. I have heard you calling in the foul wind, and in the dead cries of the night.

REDLAW. *(Quietly.)* I have called you to take this gift away, or if I must keep it, deprive me of the dreadful power of giving it to others. Undo what I have done.

THE PHANTOM. That is a power I do not possess.

REDLAW. Then what can I do? What AM I to do?

THE PHANTOM. *(Crossing to Redlaw, sarcastic.)* You will do what you first set out to do. You shall destroy memories of sorrow and suffering in all you approach. *(Imitating Redlaw from Scene 1, crossing to the door.)*

“Man and woman, boy and girl, young and old, wealthy and impoverished, believers and even they who are heathen!” *(She turns.)* Christmas Eve is on the morrow, Christmas the morrow after, and you shall be, as you said, “the benefactor of all mankind”! *(With a sneer:)* Benefactor of all mankind, I salute you! *(She turns to leave and laughs. She keeps laughing as she exits, leaving Redlaw alone in his nightmare as the door closes and the lights fade out.)*

THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—

ORDER A COPY AT WWW.NEXTSTAGEPRESS.COM