

Andrew Ostrowski's

# An Evening's Tale at Christmas

*A five-part Holiday Favorite based on the story by Charles Dickens*

*\* 2007 Decidedly Dickens Festival Silver Medalist \**

## Part I

### The Face of Hardbottom

"I hope that Father is truer to his word this year" thought little Suzi Peabody as she grasped the worn bedpost atop her cheaply fabricated feather bed. Her father's Christmas promises had come each year; and each year they remained unfulfilled, by no fault of his own. As she looked out the colonial style window of her bedroom amidst a Christmas Eve's winter storm, she anticipated silently to herself: "If only things would change, if only." Still, the melancholy look upon her face told well the tale to be told...

"Confounded fool! I rented that apartment to you so pay up!" exclaimed boldly and bluntly did Ebenezer Hardbottom in the face of his long-time tenant, Giles Peabody. You see, Hardbottom existed to rent, and rent he did. The housing landlord mogul was indeed the towering figure of his day. 'Little room for margin but lots for money' quickly became his motto. He was a shrewd business man; a man of 'reputation' as he once put it. And as he condescended vocally to poor Mr. Peabody who sat sunken in an aged leather chair directly in front of Hardbottom's mahogany desk, "Haste need not make waste" summed up Hardbottom's monotoned dialogue with the poor fellow, "So either pay me now or get out." Poor indeed he was, Mr. Giles Peabody, who delivered bottles of milk to his community in the wee hours of each morning as his profession. His meager salary could barely afford Christmas at all, except for the tips he got from two or three well-to-doers. Peabody was rejected simply due to his inability to make ends meet; it was as plain to see as the chaffed nose on his face. Having been the longest of Hardbottom's tenants by far, Peabody also did odd jobs for his landlord on occasion and gathered the respect (if such a word can be used) of old Hardbottom. Sort of in the palm of the old man's hand, was Giles Peabody. At least that is what he thought. But it was now his turn to feel neglect. Indeed he represented the typical tenant, and for that matter, the typical man of his day. Peabody supported his wife Annabel and their five children, Giles Jr., Martha, Rebecca, Suzi, and little Tim, ranging in age from six to sixteen. Struggle, hardship, and perseverance...these were all as familiar to him as the milk which he delivered. But there was another very real familiarity, that of his youngest son Tim, who was crippled since birth with a degenerative disease of the bone. It seemed the whole of Peabody's life centered around this little boy, who was often seen atop his shoulders, true to the father and son mutual spirit they held. Inseparable they were. "But Mr. Hardbottom, this was a bad month for me and I am up to my neck in debt. Please sir, I beg of you, please grant me a few extra days to earn the rent money and I will pay you" he pleaded. "No" replied the old man in the coldest, most impersonal, business-like manner. Returning to his family in a shambled section of old Tiverton town where they lived, the crestfallen Peabody was relegated to a life of subservience and dependence, down did he go, like some withering insect that was crushed under foot...



Hardbottom thought nothing of it. Returning to his desk, shrugging his shoulders and muttering defensively to himself, he drew a black fountain pen in his right hand and began to make note of the Peabody vacancy effective first thing the next morning, which happened to be the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. And as the musty stained ruffles of the ostrich feather in his pen began to fly loose into the air on account of their deterioration, Hardbottom's eyes grew increasingly weary from the day's toils and financial battles. His daily wage to win took its toll on the crafty old man of sixty-six. But this older man seen now was once the younger, dashing figure of his day, complete with the wearing of a top hat and a warm smile, and often seen nestled arm in arm with Cynthia, his long gone sweetheart. And as these memories gradually invaded his tired mind in the darkness of evening, almost spurring an internal struggle which he could not repress, he let the pen go and

napped for just a moment...just before the closing moments in his place of work.

Something, or someone, was approaching. You see, Hardbottom's establishment not only came with dusty, musty windows which one could not see through, but also with a cracked sidewalk in front which would not be replaced on account of its proprietor's best friend: money. A step on a sidewalk crack could be heard even in the remotest room of his office. Hardbottom was now in and out of a state of dreariness. And just as quiet as his appearance looked, drooped over his desk, BOOM BOOM BOOM! suddenly shattered the concaves of his office. The boisterous noise, which had apparently originated from the outside door, had cascaded itself through and through, up and down the corridors, into dark dingy areas which perhaps no man had tread, and finally arriving in the old man's left earlobe. "Who goes there?!!" violently he exclaimed. "Who goes there?!!" again he shouted as he drew nearer its source. A slight muffling of words was heard then, though difficult to distinguish with the solid maple, extra-thick, iron-clasped door in the way. "Huh,



huh, say again!" replied the old man. "Teddy, it's Teddy!" pleaded the voice outside. Unchaining the door, first by dead bolt, then by latch, he swung it open slowly and acoustically with the squeaking and crackling known only to rusted hinges. "Uncle, dear uncle, it's your nephew Theodore!" spoke the young man, about thirty, a bit slim, and dressed in moderate apparel though bearing the warmest of smiles. "Oh it's you, what are you doing wondering these dangerous streets after dark? I'll not have a relative's blood spilled and making headlines, I'll not have it hear me!" defended Hardbottom tenaciously. "Ah rubbish uncle,

I've come out on the merriest of eves, together in unison with all who feel the heart and soul of this season. It's Christmas dear uncle and I've come to wish you one!" boldly put forth the young buck as he entered his uncle's office, shutting the snowy cold weather out behind him.

At that moment Hardbottom began to emerge out of his near-sleepiness and into his standard fervor. His demeanor noticeably plummeted, almost with each passing syllable coming from his nephew's tongue. "Humbug!! What makes this night different from every other night of the year? It's cold which means I have to pay out of my pocket for fuel oil; it's snowing which means someone such as you might slip on my sidewalk and bring me to court. Merry? What right do I have to be merry, and what right do you have to wish me one?" exclaimed the old fellow to his younger counterpart. "I work, pay my lawful share of money to the governing body, eat, sleep, and get up the next day and do it all over again! And you, still looking for a job whilst caressing a young woman's cheek...I understand you are engaged now are you, why?!" inquired the elder. "Because I fell in love" replied the younger. Hardbottom countered: "Because you fell in love?! Love, wasted upon the youth who know nothing of its sorts or its consequences. How sir please tell me, will you support your soon to be spouse on nothing but a merry dream in the end of December?" At this the young Theodore began to reply but finding no words to match his affections for his fiancée Catherine, he instinctively raised his eyebrows and drew a hearty laugh exclaiming as he departed his uncle's workplace: "A Merry Christmas to you uncle!" "Baa!" replied the old man. "And a Happy New Year!" resounded the young man. "Baa!!" all the louder Hardbottom yelled. "Never in a hundred years will that boy learn, takes after his mother does he" muttered the lonely man to himself. "Baa! It's all humbug." Uncle Ebenezer, as he was known to his nephew Teddy, was the elder sibling to Teddy's mother, who died quite unexpectedly when the lad was merely three weeks old. Deep down the old man felt some sort of responsibility for his upbringing, though much of it was spent in an orphan's home having been fatherless too.

It was closing time. The ledger had been filled, corrected, filled again and yet corrected once more on this day. Hardbottom took pride in his meticulous accountability and exactness. If rent payments fell due, they were due, and nothing would be said else wise. Another day's work, another day's wages. Locking up the door as he exited, he stepped down from his crippled sidewalk and into the street, then crossed and made his way. No finer-tuned a man was there than old Ebenezer Hardbottom. Crafty and keen was he, a man of good business...

As the figure of a trim man decked in a dark wool coat parted the mist caught throughout the narrow streets in the section of town where he lived, evening had begun its metamorphosis to night. Checking in to a local pub for a bit of ale and potato stew, Hardbottom sat discontentedly in one of its makeshift wooden eating booths, sipping his stew and counting his coins interchangeably. Slurping the last of a carrot half

mixed in beef gravy, Hardbottom flipped his meal's cost on the rugged tabletop on which he dined. No sooner had the waiter wiped it away, appearing sourpussed at the discovery of this tiptless customer.

Arriving at his home, 13 Stockingbridge Manor, the fatigued old man unlocked the gate of the wrought iron fence which towered abnormally high, as if to make a statement of security, and began his one-step-two-step flight up the stoned steps leading to his door. The mist seemed to play its tricks with him, because just then out of the corner of his eye he saw what appeared to be a figure of a person hovering about ten feet above him. It intertwined with the massive shadowed limbs of an aged oak tree there, and as he blinked his eyes and shook his head: "Baa!" he uttered in disbelief. Opening the brass plated door, he entered his house, and climbed the staircase to the serenity of his study...

## Part II

### The Shadow of Cynthia

'Urrrrr r r...' sounded the door of his study as he cracked it open slowly. Taking a candle in his hand, he made his way over to the fireplace and rested it upon the mantle. Shaking his hands vigorously, he stacked a few hardwood cinders and lit a fire. It was about 45 degrees Fahrenheit in the room, which he felt obligated to keep so due to rising fuel costs. 'Little room for margin but lots for money' echoed repeatedly in his mind, almost like some spiritual mantra. He donned an evening robe and nestled into an upholstered lounge chair as the fire manifested its radiance throughout the room. Hardbottom stared into the flames wearily. Only the snapping of sap bubbles in the wood pervaded the tranquility. It was just about 11:30 p.m. on the tall, stately grandfather clock nearby.

Then, a melodious noise entered the room. "What's this nonsense, blasted fools...don't know enough to let a man sleep in peace?!" cried Hardbottom as he made his way to an overlooking window. Ten carolers had gathered below and in unison their voices resounded gloriously: "Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the feast of Stephen..." Hardbottom quickly opened the window and spoke out against them: "Be off with you!!" But they persisted: "...When the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even." At this Hardbottom became intensely furious, slamming shut the window and bolting out of the room and down the staircase. His eyes opened incredibly wide as he opened the front door and violently exclaimed: "LEAVE HERE!!!" With that monstrous ultimatum the ten little carolers scurried away in the night, half-frightened from this meanest of men.

But noticeably nearby stood the night watchman who had been making his rounds. His look of puzzlement stared old Ebbie right in the face. "Well, what's your problem? You have a job to do, better go do it then!" angrily remarked Hardbottom as snowflakes covered the tips of his ears and nose like some frosty winter warlock. "Say



"Say mister, had a bad day did you?" asked the watchman. His gray moustache was quite thick and came to a blunted point at each end of his wrinkled face, which seemed to take on the character of the town's nearby wharf which he patrolled. "You made haste o' those little ones did you" he continued. "What's it to you man? It was my affair and my affair alone; it wasn't any of your business. Go and mind your own business will you!" rebuked Hardbottom. "Here wait just a minute mister, you know it's one thing to yell at a couple 'o brats making mischief but another to do it on this night" stated the watchman. It was evident the night watchman was of the type who liked debate. In his own stubborn way he stood for principle and proper conduct which was being manifested in his discourse with old Hardbottom. "Here here my good man do you..." began Hardbottom. The watchman quickly interrupted: "Never mind now mister it's Christmas Eve, you shouldn't have yelled at those kids like that; it's cruel and rightly unconstitutional!" "What do you know about constitution, except in the foolish words heard around a pub table filled with rummies. Are you a statesman?!" the old man inquired sarcastically. "That I'm not mister. But here, you oughta be happy on this night like ev'ryone else, goin' home to a loved one, maybe wrappin' up a gift or two" softly spoke the

watchman. "My gift on this night sir, since you ask me, will be to myself and that will be the gift of sleep!" defended Hardbottom. "You are a crusty old fellow if you don't mind me sayin' so with all respect sir" exclaimed the watchman, and continued: "Here, people will start callin' you a tyrant like well, what's his name...Hitler." "What the devil are you talking about now man?! I see you may have had your nightcap a bit early this evening sir!" exclaimed old Ebbie. "But you imposed your will on them; you chased those youngsters right quick without ever givin' them a chance, poor fellows" stated the moustached man. "Didn't you learn anything from hist'ry sir? The way some folks looked down on other folks, never helpin' them, never liftin' the slightest finger to meet their needs. It's those kinds of folks this world don't need if you asked me mister! It's all about respect and dignity; yeah dignity would be the right word, to all men wheth'r or not they're rich or poor, black or white, man or woman. Yup...dignity" he continued. "Are you quite finished with your dissertation sir?" scoffed Hardbottom. "Just about mister" he replied. "Very well good night sir!" exclaimed the old man as he hastened back to his home.

Sitting himself down once again in his upstairs' study lounge chair, he took a deep breath in an effort to relax his mind from the ruckus below. It was nearing midnight as the fire's deep long shadows invaded the room, exponentially enlarging the furniture's outline on the walls. There seemed to be a bit of potato skin caught between old Eb's teeth, and reaching into the drawer of an upright table adjacent to his chair, Hardbottom attempted to locate a toothpick. "What's this?" he uttered to himself while taking out a very small, square shaped object from the back confines of the drawer. It was hinged on one side, and he proceeded to open the object. "Cyn.." he whispered. It was a keepsake photo of his long lost and forgotten sweetheart, Cynthia, who had written: *To my dearest Ebenezer, though it may storm, though it may thunder, my heart will fear not, for you are my true love, boundless and forever, Your Dearest Cynthia.* Looking up into the fire, for a mere moment his heart seemed to mellow. "A good woman from those early years" silently he thought to himself as he returned the little photo frame to the drawer. Just then the clock struck midnight; twelve grave and melancholy dongs. The fire was now nearly extinguished except for the tiny sparkling of a cinder; its shadows blending into the blackness of the night. The old man sat there with his eyes closed. One could almost hear the flurries tapping against the glass window. Silence had overtaken his presence...

"Ebeneeezer" whispered the faintest of voices from somewhere in the room. There he sat still, unaware of this cryptic call. The phantom voice came again, this time a decibel louder: "Ebeneeezer!" At that both of Hardbottom's eyelids raised quite suddenly. He sat up in the chair, looked to his left, then to his right, and gasped: "Baa! Blasted food, underdone potato, that's what it was" he muffled to himself as he prepared to leave the room and retire to bed. "Ebenezer!!" quite audibly the voice came again. Hardbottom turned and backed up into a small niche in the wall and yelled: "Who are you?! Where are you?!" Goose bumps ran the entire length of the old man's body from head to toe. He was petrified and shaking quite vigorously. "Answer me I say!! Who are you?!" quite angrily he exclaimed. He then heard the voice from whom he had not heard in nearly forty years: "Ebenezer, it is I." "Cyn, Cynthia!" he frantically exclaimed as drops of nervous sweat cascaded down his back. "Where are you? Why can't I see you?!" The voice was that of Cynthia, his departed former fiancée. And as true to the words which she had inscribed next to the photo, she said: "I have been in your presence for many years my dearest, though we parted quite sadly, I never forgot you" said her shadow, now quite visible in the moonbeam entering through the window. "Do not fear me, but listen" she continued. "Oh Cyn, why do you come to me now, in the bleakness of night, and on this awful day after no less than three scuttles with townfolk? Oh go away, go away and come back some other day, I've not the disposition to meet you now" cried the old man as he sunk to his knees in a discouraged state of mind. "Hear me my dear, I have come to warn you" affirmed the shadow. "Warn me, warn me of what?" replied old Ebbie. "Yourself and your ways. They are not the ways meant for mankind. Unless you change yourself and your actions towards others my dear, you are doomed to suffer that of those who fail to put forth good will: eternal death" explained the shadow. "But I am alive and well, I have a roof over my head and food to nourish me. I abide by the law of the land, I am a good businessman" defended Hardbottom. "Mankind is your business!" exclaimed the shadow. "Their welfare is your business, as it is everyone's business" she continued. "Oh what do you want of me, tired, poor old man that I am, it is too late to heed what you say" he replied. "You will be haunted by three spirits" she said affirmatively. "Is this supposed to help me change my ways as you said?" inquired Hardbottom. "It is" replied the shadow. "Then I'd rather

pass on this lovely opportunity you have offered me" smirked the old man. "Do not mock me, Ebenezer, but expect the first at the strike of one, the second at two, and the third at the toll of three."



And just as the shadow of Cynthia decreased near the windowsill, she beckoned him once more: "But look here and see a lesson to be learned!" The old man walked briskly to the window and looked out. A homeless man had been sitting in the street gutter just below, all huddled up with no protection from the harsh weather. Encircling the man were multitudes of spirits lamenting and attempting to cover him with blankets, but since they were of the non-physical world, it was useless. "Why can't they help the poor fellow?!" cried Hardbottom. "They could have, if they were alive, but they chose not to help others in need during their earthly life, and it is too late for them now" explained the shadow, "They are forever doomed to suffer." The spectacle below had frenzied the old man into a state of delirium. Repeatedly shaking his head back and forth in denial, he dashed away quickly out

of the room and into his pencil-post bed, completely nerve racked...

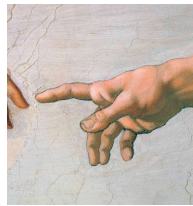
### Part III

#### The First of the Three Entities

Old Ebbie lied there in his bed, passing in and out of sleep. How could one sleep in such a state of mind? Completely covered with his bed's thick, plaid woolen blanket, he resembled a child who played tent in bed, though in Hardbottom's case, he was not playing. DINGGG! sounded the old grandfather clock's pendulum movement. It was 1 a.m. on the cold, blistering Eve of Christmas. Hardbottom thought of Cynthia's prophesy and, uncovering his head, "Baa, rubbish!" he said.

Just then the entire room was absolutely pulverized with the brightest of white light! No one, not even the old geezer himself, could see even the hand in front of their face if they tried! It was as if the room had been lifted up into the snow clouds above and had been completely engulfed in them. Hardbottom's heart rate once again escalated abnormally high. He didn't utter a word, simply because he couldn't in his petrified state of mind. The light then seemed to diminish somewhat; growing softer and softer until he could see the vague outlines of the furniture in the room. Then suddenly standing before him was a child, a mere child dressed in a white gown, with white laced sandals on his feet. "Who are you?!" inquired old Ebbie, but with a slightly less angry tone. "I am the Spirit of Christmas Past" replied the child. "Christmas past? What do you mean Christmas past, who's past?" asked the old man. "Your past" said the spirit in the softly spoken tone known only to a child. "My past? My past? What business do you have with my past, son, I don't even know you?" stated Hardbottom. "You would have known me, if you looked, for I represent all of the children you failed to see, all of them who would have welcomed the example of a smile brought upon them from an adult" articulated the spirit. "Very well, what would you have with me? Let's get it over with!" demanded Ebbie.

At that point the child slowly lifted old man saying "Touch my finger." what he was going through, obeyed the index fingers which almost resembled found himself standing on a stoned bridge could gather. He was entirely perplexed to alongside him. "Where the devil am I?" you remember? Think hard and you will quickly caught site of this and that, and he moved from side to side in sheer excitement like a child who held a new toy. Did he break a smile? Yes, and unashamed, he widened his cheeks just then! "Why, this is my school, this is my boyhood school!!" frantically full of excitement he spoke. "I attended this school! I can't believe my eyes, but I am back again, hurrah!!" he put forth boisterously. "These are merely visions of the past, they no longer exist nor can we interfere with them. They are history" explained the spirit. Both mortal and immortal proceeded to walk the halls of the school, all the while the old man increasingly growing in his excited fervor.



up his right hand and extended it towards the Hardbottom, now clearly in disgust from child and, upon the touch of their two Michelangelo's *Creation*, immediately sometime in the Springtime from what he say the least. The spirit stood there asked Hardbottom. The spirit replied: "Don't see." Then it dawned on him. His eyes

"You seem quite delighted to see all this" said the spirit. "Oh sure, of course, this brings back some good memories" affirmed the old man with a sense of contentedness. "Yet they are children going about their duties, do they deserve such merry reaction from yourself?" rebuked the spirit. "Oh it's not that, not that at all, they bring a sense of joyous excitement to a weary man's eyes, I just wish I could join th...em." As old Eb's last word crescendoed into a sorrowful pitch, something struck his conscience just then. "What's the matter?" asked the spirit. "Nothing, it's nothing" slowly replied the crestfallen man. The image of the ten little carolers he reprimanded just hours before had crossed his mind and seemed to subdue his conscience.

As he lifted his head from its effect, instantaneously he saw his younger self on the front porch of his former fiancée Cynthia. And there the two lovers were, hand in hand, sitting in a swing chair sipping lemonade on a warm summer's day. "It's only an inexpensive ring my dear, but one day I hope to buy you a fancy one" he said while grasping the third finger of her left hand, placing the ring upon it. Her eyes conveyed absolute love for him as she rested her head upon his shoulder. "Oh Eb, my heart is forever yours" she whispered. "Please, can we depart now spirit? I don't wish to be here" said Hardbottom. "But there is more" replied the spirit as the scene dramatically changed before their eyes. Hardbottom now stood in the library of Cynthia's parent's house. An air of anger and sadness had overtaken the room as Eb and Cynthia quarreled. "Why, why do you feel this way Cynthia?! Isn't it good that I should work so as to better myself, and therefore yourself if we are to be married?" he argued. "Better yourself yes, but not in a way that retracts you from me. You have changed my dear. No longer do you look upon me with mutual love. Another love has entered your life I fear, a love of money" she explained. At that Hardbottom looked at her directly in the eye, and very authoritatively gave her an ultimatum: "Well, do you accept my terms to become my wife or do you wish otherwise?" The coldness of his question affirmed to the woman that indeed he had changed. Her head dropped down and she began to cry. "Very well I release you, have it your way. Thank you" he stated quite business-like and departed her presence. Less than a year later, Cynthia would die from a broken heart.

The old man then turned away from the vision, yet the spirit persisted. "See yourself in business Ebenezer" it said. Just then he was back in his office, only this time as it appeared many, many years ago, when he was first apprenticing as rent collector for his former boss, who had later willed the business and all of its capital to Hardbottom. "Keep a keen eye young Eb and you'll succeed!" said his former mentor and boss, Sir Thomas Nottingham, a well-respected but nifty and financially skilled man of business. In his development as apprentice, the young Hardbottom had unfortunately valued the financial skills of this man more so than his benevolence, because as Ebenezer knew, he donated a large portion of his profit to homeless shelters. "Oh yes, I remember this" exclaimed the old man to the spirit as the vision now forwarded. Nottingham had passed away, and Hardbottom had taken complete control. Thrifty, cunning, and exact; these attributes were his bread and butter. There was little room for benevolence. This was a man of business, pure and simple, evidenced in the straightforward and downright impersonal treatment of his tenants. Long under the caring yoke of Nottingham, they now saw the other side of the coin, that of Hardbottom. Many were abandoned to the streets. "You signed something here that changed a person's life" interjected the spirit as the old man recollected. The vision that appeared was that of the young upstart businessman Hardbottom, signing foreclosure papers which forced an old woman out of her apartment and into the street. In tears she stood there in his office, a poor old widow of eighty-three with nowhere to go. Her money had simply run out. He said nothing to her as he handed the death sentence over. "She died within a week, poor, hungry, and distraught, in some dark dreary alleyway in the middle of the night" recalled the spirit. "But you could have prevented this."

Hardbottom was noticeably disturbed by the series of visions this young boy spirit was presenting to him. His forehead began to wrinkle with concern and his eyelids sunk nearly halfway over his eyes. "Let us leave this place and travel yet further" stated the spirit. Touching the child's finger once more, the old man found himself in an upstairs room of a home. There were several people at the bedside of what appeared to be a sick woman. Hardbottom immediately deduced this, seeing a doctor there with stethoscope. "Who is she?" asked the old man as he stood in the background. "Go and see for yourself" replied the spirit. As he approached the foot of the bed, he saw the subject of his inquiry and yelled out quite emotionally: "Nell!" It was his only sibling, his younger sister Nellie. She had just weeks earlier given birth to a child, Theodore,



and had developed complications which caused her continuous internal bleeding. She was now on her deathbed as it was plain to see. Hardbottom noticed one of the people in the room was his younger self. "No, no, don't leave you fool, come back!" he shouted to himself as the younger



Hardbottom bid farewell to his dying sister expeditiously and left the premises. "You paid your visit, be it for a few moments, and then you returned to work, didn't you?" inquired the spirit. "I...I did" reluctantly replied the old man. At that moment the dying woman gasped and breathed her final words: "Ebenezer, take care of my Teddy, take care of..." The old man heard her, though it was too late, as his younger self had already left. She was referring of course to Hardbottom's nephew Ted, who was left to fend for himself in an orphan's

home; placed there by Hardbottom himself soon after her death. This was the action he termed 'responsible'. Teddy wasn't his son, after all. As the old man stood there, tears flowed from his face as he collapsed into the palms of his hands. "Forgive me Nell, forgive me, forgive me" as he wept and then fell to his knees in agony.

Suddenly he found himself kneeling in his own bed. He grasped the woolen blanket which lay upon it and twirled it into his arms, almost in an attempt to ensure himself of his whereabouts, and perhaps his sanity. As his heavy breathing steadily diminished, he laid himself down in the bed, and then passed out because of his ordeal...

#### Part IV

#### The Spirit of Christmas Present

As the snow pummeled down and crashed its flurries haphazardly against the frosty glass of his bedroom window, the old man awoke to the startling vibrations of the grandfather clock in the next room. It was now 2 a.m. and he not only feared the possibility of another specter, but expected it. "She said 2, she said 2" he murmured to himself fraught with anticipation of Cynthia's words.

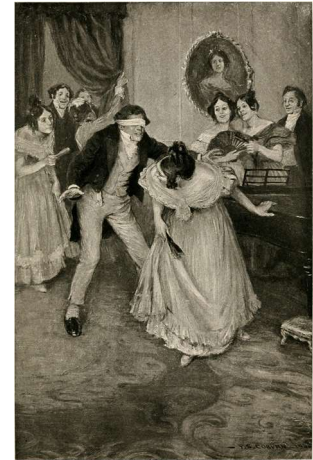
In the room adjacent to his, he sensed a terrible disturbance and upheaval as the clashing of furniture and loud ruckus was heard. The old man was petrified. "Come in!!" said a voice in the loudest tone. "Coming, coming" replied Hardbottom as he shook with fear and made his way to the door. His hand trembled as he placed it on the doorknob leading to the room. "Come in!!" the deafening voice exclaimed again. This was noticeable due to the wooden planks in the floor rattling up and down as the voice spoke. Hardbottom slowly opened the door and his eyes beheld what no living being has ever seen, or could ever imagine in their wildest dreams. "Come in man and know me! Come in, come in!" beckoned the colossal figure of a man. He was dressed in a green velvet



robe, barefoot, and wore a highlighted with red the room, literally in that he size, spanning from one Spirit of Christmas Hardbottom's head had to order to view the man's did with his mouth opened humorously interjected: mouth man, a flying creature of the night may enter it! Ha ha ha ha!!" "Oh forgive me spirit, but I've not seen such a figure as you. How, may I be permitted to ask, how heavy are you?" inquired old Eb. "Nearly 3000 Christmas' worth of stuffed goose!" replied the spirit. "Added to that, portion upon portion of the finest sliced ham, an array of assorted vegetables, minced meat pie, cracked walnut and cranberry, and a flaming hot rum pudding" he added.

"Goodness gracious my dear sir, what manner of appetite you had" put forth Hardbottom slightly with humor. "You mean "have", my good man, in the present tense. I've already dined with many a family on this solemn night. For wherever there are warm hearts, good cheer, and love, then there I will always be. You, my dear sir, are the thorn in my crown, that's why I am here." It was clear that the spirit represented everything good, from the ruby colored ring on the toe of his left foot right up to the golden tipped highlights in his curly hair. Hardbottom, on the other hand, seemed to be like an alien in his presence.

"You know the procedure" directed the spirit as he held out his arm with finger extended. "Yes, yes, into never-never land we're going I fathom" remarked old Eb. "Never say never my friend, for anything is possible if you possess the spirit" philosophically replied the specter. Immediately they were upheld in a cloud of opal white, and in the blinking of an eye, they were found just outside the window of Teddy's fiancée's home. As the old man rubbed round and round on the frosty glass to create a peep hole, a group of four were singing quite beautifully in unison: *"In Scarlet town, where I was born, there was a fair maid dwellin'..."* Hardbottom continued to look in with intensity as they continued: *"Made every youth, cry well-away; her name was Barbara Allen."* This most beautiful of ballads caught the attention of the old man, and seemed to stir his cold heart a bit. "Let's go in, let's go in!" he demanded quite boldly to the spirit. "Just for a minute" replied the spirit. And just as if a child was sucking his favorite lollypop, in sheer delight old Hardbottom's face lit up rather remarkably. He seemed to skip over to the doorway in hopes of entering the home, however, as the spirit motioned to him and frowned, he quickly realized his goof: "Oh yes, I forgot, we can go through the wall!" They proceeded to enter the dining room where the quartet had gathered. One man was at the piano as his female counterpart stood by his side singing alto soprano. Another man was seated with his beloved perched upon his lap; she somewhat of the mezzo soprano and he, most definitely the baritone bass. Hardbottom stood there and hummed along with them, apparently losing his sense of time and space. He wished to be united with them in some sort of way; this was becoming evident. However, the spirit interrupted him: "We must go."



Old Eb's merriment then turned to melancholy as he found himself in the low-lit environs of the town library, where he sensed he would encounter what he tried to avoid. "No, not here, please not here" he humbly begged. Sitting in a chair was a middle-aged man who appeared to be brokenhearted. At his side and sitting on the floor was a small child, evidently his son. The child held a half-rusted metal can and toted a sign which read in poor English: please help us, God bles you. Hardbottom knew exactly what he was witnessing. This man and his son had been begging on and off in front of the old man's office for three straight weeks. They were immigrant victims of the recent hurricane that pummeled their entire community just north of Tiverton town. Unfortunately for the father and son duo, they had no relatives living in the area, and so relied on the generosity of the locals. Hardbottom had refused them, and he knew they were taking shelter in the library, therefore avoided passing it on the street. " 'If they are meant to die they should do it then, the population is busting at the seams as it is.' These were your thoughts when they came knocking on your door asking for a few pennies" said the spirit. "And what were a few pennies out of your pocket man, too much to ask?" he continued. Hardbottom felt quite guilty just then.

As they continued across town, they passed several shops with merchants selling everything for Christmas: stockings, ribbons, bows, fruit baskets, candies, and roasted chestnuts. One encounter found them smack in the middle of a political argument between one man and another. "...You idiot, those soldiers are doing their duty! Fighting for another country's freedom with their own blood, that's called sacrifice!" cried one man. "But at who's expense though, you stupid fool, we're paying for it out of our own pockets!" argued the other. Just then the spirit sprinkled some sort of effervescent powder on them out of the palm of his hand and immediately they ceased arguing. It was incredible. "What kind of devilry do you hold in your hand?" inquired Hardbottom. "The kind that spreads peace on earth and good will towards all, so devils have nothing to do with it!" laughed the obese, jolly spirit. It was becoming quite funny actually, because as they walked down the street, the entire span of the spirit's body stretched from sidewalk to sidewalk; he was so



fat. Hardbottom couldn't hold it in any longer; his giggling couldn't stay hidden. "Out with it man, what are you chuckling at?!" asked the spirit. Looking for an excuse due to the embarrassing truthful reply, old Ebbie instead declared: "Oh it tickles my nose a little to see these people just walking right through you! I would like to try it." Since the spirit was so wide from hip to hip, he could not walk around the townsfolk, but just let them walk through him. Hardbottom intentionally began to stand in front of the passers-by, and as they passed through him, he voiced his feelings considerably: "Ha...ha...ha, ha, ha!! I can feel their soul, their true spirit, some are bad, some are good. It's amazing!" he exclaimed. "It is because each man's spirit touches another. It is the soul which endures Ebenezer; the body merely carries it through this life" explained the spirit.

They eventually arrived at the home of Giles Peabody. The section of town where he and his family lived was quite ravished. It was a poor man's neighborhood. Litter had accumulated on the streets, and many buildings were noticeably deteriorated, including Peabody's, which Hardbottom owned and rented to desperate tenants. "Come this way, I want you to see something" directed the spirit as he floated himself up to the second story of the building. Hardbottom followed. Glancing into the cracked window, the spirit said: "I see a soon-to-be empty chair in front of a fireplace, with a crutch at its side." "You're not referring to Peabody's child are you? But I tried..." said the old man as he began to offer an excuse for his blighting of Peabody earlier. "You tried nothing!" angrily replied the spirit. "This child's father was in need, just as many fathers are. He needed to be helped. Is he a roach under your foot that you should treat him as such?" he added. "You could have at least given him a grace period to pay his rent. Then perhaps he could have put food on his table and the child would have been nourished. But no, you demanded that he pay you because you are a proper man of business who dots his i's and crosses his t's come hell or high water" sarcastically said the spirit.

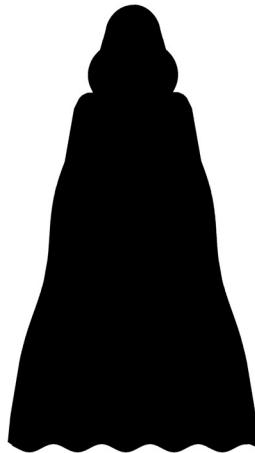
Then in the blinking of an eye, Hardbottom found himself on a desolate street corner and heard the voice of the spirit but could not see him. "If they are meant to die they should do it then...if they are meant to die they should do it then...if they are meant..." echoed his words over and over which seemed to pulsate into the old man's mind frantically. He ran haphazardly left and right, knocking over garbage cans and causing a great frenzy. He became quite hysterical as he bolted himself down a dark alleyway, crashing again into several crates. And then as he ran furiously he suddenly lifted his head in the blackness of the night and heard the BOOM!!! of a gravely sounding bell from afar. "Aaaaaahhhhh!" he yelled deliriously. Someone, or something, stood before him...

## Part V

### The Ghost of the Apocalypse/Finale

Hardbottom just then recalled what he had been told by Cynthia: 'expect the third at the toll of three'. The terrifying figure of her prophecy stood before him, as a dead limb on a tree hangs, hunched over slightly and draped in the blackest of gowns. He it had been sunken deep within its black foretold to me?" inquired the petrified lowered very slowly and then raised in the wake of the deep, gloomy bell things not of the past nor of the present, continued. Once again the dreadful "Spirit, I fear you the most, but I am Eb with hesitation.

Something then happened was expecting the spirit's finger to quickly whirled its black gown into the the old man into a giant cocoon-like frightened old man being covered in close encounter, and found himself



could not see the specter's face because hooded coif. "You are the spirit old man. Just then its blackened head itself up again; an appropriate gesture tolling. "You have come to show me but of the future, is that so spirit?" he nod of the specter's head replied. ready to accompany you" uttered old

unexpectedly. Just as Hardbottom emerge out of its black sleeve, it snowy air, encompassing itself and black pod. "Ahhhh!" cried the black. He had not expected such a literally up against the spirit, which he

felt not as flesh and bone, but as a cold, empty void. In an instant he emerged from the gown to discover himself inside a large abandoned building, which appeared to be a former institution of some sort. As he walked about, he could hear the echoes of voices resonating throughout its empty halls which created a haunting effect. The spirit stood motionless in the distance and observed him. "Where am I, what is this lonely place?" asked Hardbottom. As he drew nearer and nearer to the spirit, he saw an aged plaque on a wall which read: 'St. Bartholomew's Orphanage - In Memoriam' and deduced that it had been closed. He remembered the orphanage's petitioners arriving at his door asking for financial support to keep the merciful institution running. He refused, offering them instead a discourse on the 'survival of the fittest' evolutionary concept, which he applied to Man. There he stood as the sounds of screaming children in need invaded his mind. "No, no, no!" he cried out as the spirit's black gown once again whirled upward and over him...

Hardbottom then felt a bit of reprieve in finding himself back on the familiar turf of his town. "Yes I know this place, it was Peabody's home. Second floor correct?" he asked. As he looked into the window outside of the former Peabody residence, he saw an empty room, three text books stacked in the corner, a roll of yarn which was soiled from the black ash of an extinguished fireplace, and a small wooden crutch hanging by itself. Hardbottom's eye focused on the crutch, and as he turned to the specter, a look of sheer anger overcame him because he realized it belonged to Peabody's ailing son. "Tell me this will not happen spirit. Surely if there are means to cure this boy then tell me. Why don't you speak?! I demand you tell me!" angrily exclaimed the old man. The spirit turned and lowered itself back down to street level, and old Eb, now quite upset, followed behind...

They proceeded to enter a narrow street which was filled with a grayish mist. As they began to walk through it, Hardbottom cried out: "Wait a minute, I cannot see where I am going, I am blinded, give me light." There was none. Instead, the old man was completely stunned to then see the latest vision set before his eyes. He saw the entire scope of the world! A look of distraught came over him, because as he saw scenes of horrendous suffering, hunger, and homelessness, he realized he was seeing the future of mankind. Great upheavals of people were scattered over the land. Small children were crying endlessly as they searched for their parents. Because of greed and the thirst for money by rich men of power, separations between people occurred, as the wailing and lamenting of the poor permeated the air. The spirit was showing him how men of his disposition collectively destroy the world because they willingly lose the gift of grace, which keeps the world in harmony. He then saw a giant scale made of brass, and saw his soul being weighed. In each of the two measuring plates was placed the entire sum of his lifetime thoughts and actions; one side for good, the other for bad. He stood and watched as the scale began to tip...but not in a favorable direction. As he stood there muttering foul words to himself, he saw the scale sink...and sink...and sink down with bad. "No, no, no!" he burst out, scurrying this way and that way in complete delirium. Just then he fell! "Ahhhh!" he screamed as he plummeted down endlessly, almost as if he fell into the bowels of the earth. As he twisted and turned downward in the air, he could feel cuts and scratches being inflicted upon him, which were coming from the people whom he would not help in life. The old man let out violent screams in his state of mayhem as he then crashed to the end of his fall. Rubbing his eyes clear from the windy plummet, he looked to see his surroundings and exclaimed again in petrified fury: "Ahhh!!!" He found himself mangled and contorted in an endless sea of bones! Every kind of human anatomical bone covered him. "Get me out, get me out!" he cried out furiously. "I will not be the man I was! I will not be the man I was!" he yelled as he struggled amidst the stew of bones. "Oh please good spirit, I swear on my honor and on the honor of men that I will change my ways!" he exclaimed boldly as he looked up into the heavens. "I know that certain means may change certain ends, and because I have caused great pain and distress among my fellow man, then surely permit me to put forward good will and benevolence so that the future will not be as bleak as I have seen. Oh please, please spirit tell me this will not be so, tell me that there is still hope for me while I live, oh please, please help me good spirit..." he desperately cried out while tears streamed down his face from his bloodshot eyes...

Instantaneously upon his words, old Eb found himself once more encompassed in fabric. But it wasn't the dreaded black gown of the spirit which he had come to expect. Instead, it was his own woolen bed blanket. He was back at home! "What's this? I'm back!!" he exclaimed boldly as he jumped out from under the blanket onto the cold, plank board floor of his bedroom and began to dance around in a joyous frenzy.

Opening the window at the other side of the room, he took in a deep breath of winter air and felt the vigor that he knew as a boy. Even the wrinkles around his eyes seemed to subside. Clearly he was going through some wild metamorphosis! Hardbottom caught sight of a young man walking along the street below and asked: "Hey you! You there, what day is it?" "Are you kidding me sir, what kind of question is that?!" replied the young man sarcastically. "No, I'm serious, I've been quite ill and laid up in bed, and haven't a clue" stated Hardbottom. "Well in that case, it's Christmas day sir!" At that moment Hardbottom clenched his fists tight and yelled out: "I haven't missed it! The darned spirits have done it all in one night! Ha ha ha ha!!"

Exactly one hour later, the giant door of his home opened slowly. And standing on its saddle was the sharpest, most elegantly dressed man ever seen in town! Old Hardbottom, or should we say, New Hardbottom, stood there with the merriest of smiles, and sported the closest of shaves! Quite the 'Hollywood' man he was, causing many heads to turn from the ladies of the town! He walked with a sparkle in his eye and a fire in his heart! "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" he exclaimed mightily as he greeted each person that passed. He made his rounds throughout town, popping in to see his various tenants and granting them lengthy extensions to pay their rent. In some cases, he actually wrote refund checks! The orphanage which he shunned quickly became one of the first recipients of his newfound generosity, receiving a generous donation which allowed them to remain open. And his nephew Teddy, did he ever win big! You see, Hardbottom gave the young man control of one-half of his rental properties. In other words, Teddy became his partner in business! Indeed it was fast becoming known that Mr. Ebenezer Hardbottom exemplified the true spirit of Christmas.

But this evening tale at Christmas doesn't end yet...because there was one matter of unfinished business...and that was the matter of Mr. Giles Peabody.

Just before sunset, on this, the merriest of Christmas days, a completely enraptured Hardbottom reflected to himself: "Ah yes, he'll soon be getting what he deserves, that Peabody fellow...ha ha ha ha!" Simultaneously, poor Mr. Peabody was opening an envelope addressed to him which was delivered by special courier. It had been Hardbottom's first order of business this December 25<sup>th</sup> to reconcile the many years of grief he had bestowed upon the loyal Peabody. And he did it in grand style! "To Mr. Giles Peabody" read aloud the poor man to his wife and children. "Whereas, hence forth the tenant occupying this space shall be deemed to pay the monthly sum of 0 dollars and 0 cents for a period lasting no less than 10 years from the date of this letter." Peabody was shocked! "Who is it from my dear, who sent it?" inquired his wife. The bewildered Peabody looked further down the officially prepared notice to discover the feather-penned signature of Ebenezer Hardbottom. "What!!!" he shouted out. "But it's from Mr. Hardbottom, what in the world would cause him to take leave of his senses?!" Just then a tug on his trousers from his crippled son Tim offered the sincere reply: "Daddy, I know! It's the spirit of Christmas! When everyone is heart to heart, and hand in hand"...

