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Dramatic Publishing

A HIGH COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

By
ROBERT INMAN



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Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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“Originally commissioned and produced by Blowing Rock Stage Company, Kenneth Kay, Producing Artistic Director, world premiere production opened December 2008, The Marian & Robert Hayes Performing Arts Center, Blowing Rock, North Carolina.”

A High Country Christmas received its world premiere at the Blowing Rock Stage Company, Blowing Rock, North Carolina, December 5, 2008. It was directed by Kenneth Kay; with set design by Tim Billman, lighting design by Sean Plane, costumes were designed by Melody Yates, sound design was by Gary Lee Smith, props were designed by Jesseca Terhaar, and the production stage manager was Lisa Lamont*. The cast was as follows:

Silas McTavish	Gary L Smith*
The Guest	Melvin Tunstall
Abner Veazey	Chris Wright*
Dolly Veazey	Kim Cozort*
Mrs. Walker	Melanie Bullard
Mr. Walker	Dean Lyons
Father McTavish	Doug Jones
Mother McTavish	Pam Jones
Angus McTavish	Fred Wilson
Malvina McTavish	Ali Keirn
Fiona	Sarah Brown
Young Silas	Lee Greene
Minister	Ed Pilkington*

The Veazey Children:

Caleb	Jonathan Faulks
Sara	Julia O'Connor
Tom	Max Schlenker
Heather	Morgan Story
Jacob	Tucker Greene
Tessie	Olivia Waters
James Earl	Colton Courtney

The McTavish Children: Nathan Jones, Lauren Jones,
Maggie Idol

* *Indicates membership in Actors' Equity Association*

A HIGH COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

CHARACTERS

SILAS MCTAVISH . . . curmudgeonly general store owner

ABNER VEAZEY his clerk

DOLLY VEAZEY Abner's wife

CALEB VEZEY Abner's teenage son, also working in
the store

OTHER VEAZEY CHILDREN Sara, Tom, Jacob,
Tessie, Heather

LUTHER WALKER Abner's neighbor and friend

ADA WALKER Luther's wife, nursing a sick infant

THE GUEST a mysterious visitor to Silas on
Christmas Eve

THE MINISTER a local preacher

FATHER MCTAVISH . . Silas' father in long-ago Scotland

A HIGH COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

(A mountain community in the dead of winter during the Great Depression. Weatherbeaten buildings, gaunt bare-limbed trees, a rough-hewn general store with a sign: MCTAVISH MERCANTILE. Snow on nearby mountaintops. A look and feel of grim bleakness.)

(People moving about, greeting one another, stopping to talk, then moving on. All are shabbily and thinly dressed against the cold.)

(ABNER VEAZEY and his teenaged son CALEB enter. CALEB hobbles on a crutch, one foot bare and wrapped in a bandage. From the opposite direction, LUTHER WALKER enters and crosses to ABNER and CALEB. LUTHER carries an ax over his shoulder.)

LUTHER. Morning, folks. Abner, Caleb...

ABNER. Good day to you, Luther. *(They shake hands.)*

CALEB. Merry Christmas.

LUTHER. And to you. Caleb, what's the matter with your foot?

CALEB. Got a cut on it, Mr. Walker. Some barbed wire.

LUTHER. Did it happen over at my place yesterday?

CALEB. Yes sir.

LUTHER. You shoulda said something, Caleb.

ABNER. It's just a scratch, Luther. It'll heal up in no time.

LUTHER. Is it swole up?

CALEB. Can't get my shoe on.

LUTHER. I feel badly about that. *(To ABNER.)* There's no way I'da got that fence mended without Caleb's help. And then didn't have nothing to pay him with but a sack of turnips.

ABNER. Neighbors got to help neighbors, Luther. 'Specially times like these. As for those turnips, we're mighty glad to have 'em. They'll be part of our Christmas dinner tomorrow.

LUTHER. Well, my missus'll be by the store in a bit. She'll know what to do about that foot.

ABNER. Ada knows how to heal anything from chigger bites to the galloping consumption. *(To CALEB.)* Speaking of the store, Caleb, you go on and get a fire started in the stove.

CALEB. Yes sir.

(CALEB exits as a MINISTER enters, carrying a Bible. He crosses to ABNER and LUTHER.)

MINISTER. Morning, fellows. Brother Veazey, Brother Walker.

LUTHER. Merry Christmas.

ABNER. Good to see you, Preacher.

MINISTER. Another day the Lord has given us. Faith and strength to face trials and tribulations. *(To LUTHER, indicating ax.)* You doing some wood chopping today, Luther?

LUTHER. We're about out of firewood, and with the baby feeling poorly, we need the house as warm as we can get it. So I'm headed to Maple Branch. But first, I'm stopping at Vester Hargrove's place to help 'em load up.

ABNER. Load up?

LUTHER. Ain't you heard? They're pulling out, day after tomorrow.

MINISTER. Lord, another one.

ABNER. What're they gonna do?

LUTHER. Vester says he's heard the government's hiring down the mountain. Building a new road. Trying to put folks to work.

ABNER. 'Afore long, ain't gonna be much of anybody left around here.

MINISTER. And a shame it is. Far back as my great-granddaddy, folks been living off this land, hard as it is. Then the timber company comes in, hires all the men, folks get used to storebought.

ABNER. And when the timber's all played out, the company pulls up stakes and goes away. Leaves us high and dry.

LUTHER. And that was all *before* this Depression business.

MINISTER. Folks scabbling around, trying to make it, but seems like there's more room in the pews at church every Sunday. I can look at every empty seat and think, there's another family that had to give up and leave.

ABNER. Hard to keep folks' spirits up in times like these.

MINISTER. I do what I can.

LUTHER. Well, I best be gettin' on over to Vester's place.

ABNER. And I'd better get to the store before Mr. McTavish does.

LUTHER. Abner, there's times I wonder how you stand it.

ABNER. I've got a job, Luther. That's how I stand it.

MINISTER. I'll look for you fellows and your families at church tonight.

(ABNER, LUTHER and the MINISTER exit as a group of CHILDREN—among them, SARA, TOM, HEATHER, JACOB and TESSIE—enter, spiritedly singing “Good King Wenceslas.” They stop along the street.)

SINGERS.

GOOD KING WENCESLAS LOOK-ED OUT
ON THE FEAST OF STEPHEN;
WHEN THE SNOW LAY ROUND ABOUT,
DEEP AND CRISP AND EVEN.
BRIGHTLY SHONE THE MOON THAT NIGHT
THOUGH THE FROST WAS CRUEL;
WHEN A POOR MAN CAME IN SIGHT,
GATH'RING WINTER FUEL.
IN HIS MASTER'S STEPS HE TROD,
WHERE THE SNOW LAY DINTED;
HEAT WAS IN THE VERY SOD
WHICH THE SAINT HAD PRINTED.
THEREFORE, CHRISTIAN MEN, BE SURE,
WEALTH OR RANK POSSESSING;
YE WHO NOW WILL BLESS THE POOR
SHALL YOURSELVES FIND BLESSING.

(As the song is ending, SILAS MCTAVISH enters. He's old, brusque and crotchety, a miserly man with a sour countenance. He crosses near the SINGERS and stops to glare at them. He speaks with a Scottish accent.)

SILAS. See here, what are you young ruffians doing?

SARA. Practicing for the pageant at the church tonight,
Mr. McTavish.

TOM. And trying to spread a little Christmas cheer.

SILAS. Well, I won't have you doing it in front of my store. Christmas...bullfeathers! There's no Christmas cheer in these parts, and you'd be better off looking for some honest labor to put food in your empty bellies.

HEATHER. But Mr. McTavish...

SILAS. Off with you, now! And don't come back, not with any Christmas nonsense! (*SILAS stomps away as the SINGERS stare at him.*)

TESSIE. Merry Christmas, Mr. McTavish.

SILAS. Bullfeathers!

TOM (*to the others*). Well, *he* sure ain't Good King Wenceslas.

(Lights down on the SINGERS as they dash away, laughing.)

(Lights up on MCTAVISH's general store. A counter with an ancient cash register, shelves sparsely stocked, a pot-bellied stove. A broom resting against the counter. ABNER kneels next to the stove, tossing in a couple of sticks of firewood. CALEB hobbles on his crutch, placing sacks of cornmeal on a shelf. SILAS enters and crosses to ABNER.)

SILAS. And what do you think you're doing, Abner?

ABNER. Trying to take the chill off, Mr. McTavish.

SILAS. Good grief, man, it's winter. Nothing's going to take the chill off. It's a waste.

ABNER. Do you want me to take the wood out?

SILAS. Of course not, Abner, it's already on fire. But before you waste any more of my precious firewood, ask me.

ABNER. All right, Mr. McTavish.

(MCTAVISH takes off his coat and hat and hangs them on a rack. ABNER rises, closes the door to the stove, picks up a clerk's apron and puts it on. SILAS frowns at CALEB.)

SILAS. What's wrong with you, boy?

CALEB. I hurt my foot.

SILAS. I can see that.

ABNER. An accident, Mr. McTavish. He was helping our neighbor Mr. Walker mend a fence and cut his foot on some barbed wire.

SILAS. Good heavens, boy, weren't you wearing shoes?

CALEB. Yes sir.

ABNER. His shoes got holes in 'em, Mr. McTavish. Just like everybody else's around here. We stuffed cardboard in the bottom, but cardboard ain't no match for barbed wire.

SILAS. Well, see that it doesn't interfere with your work, boy. Else, I'll have to find me somebody else.

CALEB. Yes sir. I'll be all right. I can do it.

SILAS. And be careful with those sacks of cornmeal. I'll hold you accountable for every one.

(CALEB glances at his father, who's standing now behind SILAS. ABNER makes a cutting motion across his throat with a finger. CALEB laughs.)

SILAS (*cont'd*). What's so funny, boy?

CALEB. Nuh...nothing, sir.

SILAS (*turning to ABNER*). I haven't seen anything to be funny about in many years, Abner, especially the last few. Hard times don't call for humor.

ABNER. Yes sir. Hard times ain't funny a bit.

SILAS. And if humor takes the place of the necessities of life at the Veazey home, I'd say you've got things all backwards.

ABNER. Humor don't take the place, Mr. McTavish, I can assure you. A house full of young'uns to feed, clothe and keep warm, and we are all working mighty hard to keep body and soul together. But we do enjoy a light-hearted moment once in a while. It seems to ease the hardship a bit.

SILAS. Bullfeathers! I'll be in the storeroom, Abner, but I'll be keeping an eye on things. (*To CALEB.*) Well, don't just stand there, boy, grab a broom. The place needs sweeping.

(He exits. CALEB reaches for the broom.)

ABNER. Here, son, I'll do that. You dust the shelves.

(ABNER takes the broom and starts sweeping. CALEB limps back to the shelves and starts cleaning them with a feather duster.)

CALEB. Papa.

ABNER. Yes?

CALEB. Have you talked to Mr. McTavish about Christmas?

ABNER (*glancing offstage*). Not yet. I've been waiting until he's in a better mood.

CALEB. But Papa, he's *never* in a better mood. You could wait 'til the spring thaw. Or the next century. Christmas is tomorrow. We all need to be together, at home.

ABNER. You're right, son. I'll ask him.

CALEB. Are you still dead set on inviting him to dinner?

ABNER. Yes, just like I always do. He never accepts, but at least he knows we've offered a bit of Christmas hospitality.

CALEB. Well, I sure hope he don't accept this time. I'm gettin' indigestion just thinkin' about it.

(A whoosh of raw wind and ADA WALKER enters. She's poorly dressed in a thin coat with a scarf tied over her head and ears, shivering from the cold.)

ABNER. Mornin', Ada. Lordy, you look like you're about to turn into an icicle.

ADA. Feel that way, too, Abner. I been cold a lot in my life, but I can't ever remember feeling this miserable.

(ABNER crosses to her and puts an arm around her shoulder.)

ABNER. Well, come on over here and warm yourself. *(He leads her to a chair next to the stove.)* Not that there's a whole lot of warmth from that old piece of a stove.

CALEB. Would be if Mr. McTavish wasn't such an old goat about his firewood.

ABNER (*glancing offstage*). Caleb!

CALEB. Yes sir.

ABNER. Back to your work, son. (*He helps ADA into the chair.*)

CALEB. Yes sir. Morning, Miz Walker. Merry Christmas.

ADA. And to you, Caleb. Luther says you cut your foot helping him with that fence.

CALEB. It's all right, I reckon. A mite swole up and sore.

ADA. Tell your mama I said make a poultice of milk cream, vinegar and onion. It'll draw the soreness right out.

CALEB. Yes'm, I'll do that.

ADA. I feel right badly that you got hurt helping Luther.

ABNER. Ada, it wouldn't do to have your cow out roaming. As many hungry folks as we got around here, somebody might claim they mistook her for a moose.

ADA. Eating old Bess would be like chewing on shoe leather. There ain't much left of her these days. She's about as hungry as the rest of us. Ain't giving much milk, that's for sure.

ABNER. How's your little one doing?

ADA. Her cough just keeps getting worse. Nothing I do seems to make it any better. It breaks my heart, hearing her all night long, wondering if she's gonna just stop breathing.

ABNER. I'll ask Dolly to drop by and see if there's anything she can do to help.

ADA. I'd be mighty grateful. (*Rising wearily.*) And now I best be getting on about my day. I come to get a little sugar so I can make some Christmas cookies. It's about all we'll have in the way of a celebration.

ABNER. Why, yes ma'am. How much do you need?

ADA. It'll take a quarter-pound.

ABNER. Caleb, measure out Miz Walker some sugar.

CALEB. Yes sir. (*CALEB measures the sugar and puts it in a small paper sack while ABNER and ADA move to the counter.*)

ABNER. Let's see, Miz Walker, that'll be seven cents.

(*ADA takes a small coin purse from a pocket. She opens it and pulls out a nickel. She looks up at ABNER, stricken.*)

ADA. Five cents. It's all I've got, Abner.

ABNER. Well, seeing how it's Christmas Eve, and all, maybe we could just let you have it on credit.

(*SILAS enters abruptly, holding a money pouch.*)

SILAS. Did I hear somebody say "credit"?

ABNER. Mrs. Walker...

SILAS. I heard that part too. It's well known, Mrs. Walker, that this establishment does not extend credit. To any one, at any time. I have to pay for goods when I purchase them, and the same goes for my customers. If I start extending credit, I'll soon be out of business.

ABNER. But Mr. McTavish...

SILAS. And if my clerk doesn't understand that rule, perhaps he's working in the wrong place.

(*CALEB is watching all this, openmouthed with amazement.*)

(*ABNER jams his hand in his pants pocket, fishes around and pulls out two pennies.*)