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Dramatic Publishing



A PLAY IN ONE ACT

Mimsy Were the Borogoves

by

CHARLES G. TAYLOR

Adapted from the Story by

LEWIS PADGETT

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
—Lewis Carroll



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By Lewis Padgett

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MIMSY WERE THE BOROGOVES

A Play in One Act

For Two Men and Three Women

CHARACTERS

SCOTT PARADINE *a teen-ager*
EMMA *his sister*
JANE *his mother*
DENNIS *his father*
MARY JOHNSON *psychologist*

Offstage voices

PLACE: *A suburban home.*

TIME: *The present.*

NOTES ON CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES

SCOTT PARADINE: A teen-aged high school student, dressed casually. As long as he doesn't wear a suit, shirt, and tie, his specific clothing isn't important; but Scott, resenting the adult world as he does, would not adopt their clothing but rather choose attire more expressive of his own age group, toward whom he is not so bitter.

EMMA PARADINE: Scott's younger teen-aged sister. She should wear simple casual clothes, as if she wanted to be overlooked in a crowd.

JANE PARADINE: Their mother. She should be dressed in a sophisticated dress or suit suitable for an afternoon of bridge or shopping, later changes to much dressier clothes. In her late thirties, she is attractive and perhaps feels that in having had two children she has done all that could be asked of her. She feels that she should be sheltered and protected from problems and unpleasantness as well as entertained, both because of her great sacrifice and for the charming and important person that she is.

DENNIS PARADINE: The same age as his wife, he works hard and effectively at the office and assumes that his wife is doing everything necessary at home, even though he's vaguely aware that problems do exist. He is dressed casually at first, for golfing; later he changes to a suit.

MARY JOHNSON: The psychologist. She is young, attractive, rather dedicated. She should wear a simple dress or suit. She is obviously intelligent and informed in her field.

PROPERTIES

GENERAL: A typical living room. It may be furnished in any convenient style. The only items necessary to the action are a table and a sofa.

SCOTT: Box containing "abacus" and "ball" (for descriptions see pages 9 and 10); various objects in his pockets, such as small stones, candle ends, and other "junk."

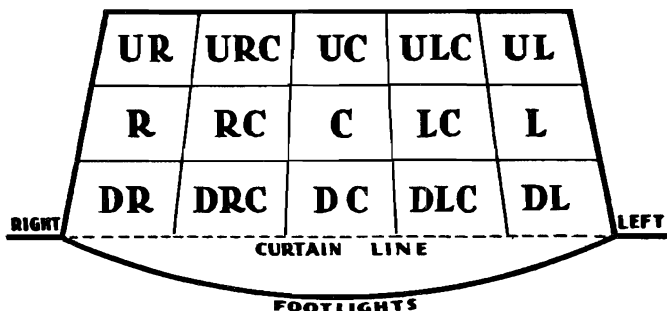
JANE: Wrist watch.

DENNIS: Wallet containing currency.

EMMA: Small objects similar to Scott's "junk."

MARY: Slip of paper.

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

Prologue

The house lights dim out, and two pools of light appear on the act curtain--L and R. Voices are heard--from everywhere and nowhere. The first is a child. The second belongs to her father.

CHILD

Father, you're working a long time.

FATHER

Hello, daughter. Yes . . . a long time.

CHILD

Another space capsule?

FATHER

Yes . . . another. It's my hobby, and it's nearly ready.

(Another pool of light appears on the curtain C--smaller than the first two. It shimmers)

CHILD

The others haven't returned?

FATHER

No. If this one fails, I intend to give up these experiments. By the way, I needed to include solids in the box which would be subject to entropy and

cosmic rays. So I've put in two of your old toys.
Do you mind?

CHILD

Those old educational toys . . . I haven't used
them since I was a baby. Where are you sending
this capsule?

FATHER

To a planet with a life similar to our own . . .
except that it's several thousand years behind us.
(The small /center/ pool begins to bright-
en and flicker)

CHILD

(Laughs)

Suppose my toys fell into the hands of some chil-
dren in that primitive place--they'd be baffled!

FATHER

I'm not so sure, daughter. None of us are born
with knowledge; we acquire it. And what we start
with are toys like these. Even the most primitive
child might be able to take these toys and----

(Interrupts himself)

--but I doubt very much that *anyone* there will dis-
cover my little capsule.

(The light brightens to maximum inten-
sity, glistens, and goes out)

CHILD

Where is it exactly that you're sending this one?

FATHER

To the third planet out from a small star. They call
their planet "Earth."

(The two larger pools of light fade out)

Scene One

SCENE: The main action takes place in the living room of the Paradine home. It is the well-furnished room of a successful engineer. The main entrance to the room is from the hall. Aside from this there is one other door leading to a study known as "the vault" to the Paradine family.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: It is late afternoon. SCOTT PARADINE, a good-looking teenager, enters--followed by his slightly younger sister, EMMA. They glance quickly around the room.

SCOTT

They're not home yet.

EMMA

It's too early. Today's bridge for her and golf for him.

SCOTT

I'll get it, then.

(He exits to the hall momentarily, returning with a curious box. It has no visible lock or means of opening and closing. The pair hold it gingerly--examining it carefully)

Let's look at the toys some more. Do you suppose

you can open it again?

EMMA

Sure. I did it before.

SCOTT

But do you remember exactly how you did it?

EMMA

I don't need to remember--I just know.

(She starts to work her hands around
the box in no particular pattern)

SCOTT

How can you just know? I can't even see where it
opens. There's no mark on the box--how do you
know where to touch?

EMMA

I just know. . . .

(She finishes her movements and opens
the box)

See.

SCOTT

Nothin' to it!

(Each reaches into the box and takes out
a hand-sized object. Scott's resembles
a small abacus, but it is not recognizable
as such--just a maze of wires and
beads running at curious, odd angles to
its strange-shaped frame. Emma's ob-
ject is a ball which looks as if it might
be crystal. It shines weirdly)

EMMA

Now, let's see . . .

SCOTT

(Jumping)

Ouch! The beads shocked me!

EMMA

Here, let me see it.

(She reaches out and moves one of the beads)

SCOTT

How come they didn't shock you?

EMMA

I'm younger.

SCOTT

That doesn't make any sense! But . . . somehow . . . I know that's the right answer. You're younger. How'd you know that was why?

EMMA

I . . . knew it. I'll take the abacus. You take the ball.

(They trade objects. While EMMA tinkers with the abacus, SCOTT begins to examine the ball. He turns it; he shakes it. He peers into it)

SCOTT

(Excitedly)

Hey, Em, I've found them! Look!

(He shows EMMA inside of the ball)

EMMA

That's it! Now, go on from there.

(She returns to her work while SCOTT concentrates on looking into the ball)

SCOTT

They're burning it now. They're burning the house.

EMMA

Our house?

SCOTT

Looks like it.

EMMA

That's a silly way to start.

SCOTT

(To the ball--or someone inside it)

Now, put it out!

(To EMMA)

Man, you should see that fire-fighting equipment.
This is sure a lot better than . . . than the real
life.

EMMA

How do you know that isn't more real?

SCOTT

I like it! Sure, you're right. How come you understand quicker than I do?

EMMA

It reminds me of something I read.

SCOTT

What?

EMMA

A poem in a children's book. A nonsense poem.

SCOTT

You're quick. Do you suppose they're trying to teach us something?

EMMA

I don't know.

SCOTT

I don't like being taught, but these are different.

EMMA

Is the fire out? They'll be here soon.

SCOTT

Almost out.

(He concentrates into the ball for a moment. Then he heaves a sigh and places it back into the box. EMMA follows suit with the abacus)

EMMA

Where should we hide the box? We could hide it in the study . . . behind some of dad's old books.

SCOTT

No, not in that vault! There's no way in or out of there except this door. We might not be able to get it when we'd want it.

EMMA

Where, then? Mother goes into every nook and cranny when she cleans.

SCOTT

Why hide it at all?

EMMA

I . . . I don't know.

SCOTT

Is the box something bad?

EMMA

Oh, no, it can't be!

SCOTT

We're not even sure what it is.

EMMA

It's something very . . . very important . . . to us.

SCOTT

Yes, it's important . . . to all we want!

JANE

(Offstage)

What's important?

(SCOTT and EMMA jump. EMMA closes the box just as JANE PARADINE, mother of the two, enters)

EMMA

Oh!

JANE

Scare you?

SCOTT

You're early.

JANE

Yes. That rat, Sue Painter, suddenly developed a case of intestinal virus. Rotten sportsmanship! I was close to a slam!

(Making an effort to conceal the box,
SCOTT and EMMA start to leave the
room)

JANE

What have you two got there?

EMMA

Nothing.

JANE

What is that--a box? A box of what?

SCOTT

It's just some of our stuff. Nothing!

EMMA

We're going to put it away upstairs.

JANE

Just a minute. What's in that thing? What's so important that you've got to hide it from your mother? Is it something you've charged? Your father'll hit the roof!

SCOTT

Mother, it's nothing we charged!

JANE

What, then? Where'd you get it? You're acting so guilty.

SCOTT

We're not acting guilty! What do you care? It didn't cost you anything . . . no money . . . no bridge time!

JANE

Scott Paradine, how many times must you be corrected for taking that tone with your mother!

SCOTT

I'm sorry.

JANE

Now, I think you'd better let me see that box.

EMMA

Mother, it's really nothing . . .

JANE

I hope it's nothing, but you act like it's something!

EMMA

It's just ours . . .

JANE

Open the box!

SCOTT

It's not right for you to ask! You've got no right!

JANE

No right? A mother has no right? That's what all kids think today!

SCOTT

It's private! We're old enough to have private things!

EMMA

Scottie, maybe it doesn't matter.

SCOTT

It matters! Because she's always trying to prove

we're doing something wrong!

JANE

Rest assured, your father will have something to say about your conduct, young man!

SCOTT

So he makes you a martini, lectures us for fifteen minutes, and ends up slipping us ten bucks apiece!

EMMA

Scottie, don't!

SCOTT

Oh, he knows his duty, all right!

JANE

No respect! Moody, you and your crowd--all moody children! Do you take dope, too--and write filthy books? Is that what's in the box?

SCOTT

Oh, for . . .

EMMA

Mother, it's not anything like that!

JANE

And you too, Emma! When I was your age, the women in a family stuck together! They had to! But you're always siding with your brother!

EMMA

I don't think it's necessary to stick to somebody . . . right or wrong . . . just because they're the same sex.

JANE

You're too close . . . you two! You always have been!

SCOTT

Now what are you accusing us of?

JANE

We're going to have this out, my boy!

(Glancing at her watch)

Oh, gosh--your father and I are due at the Crawfords' in two hours.

(Back to SCOTT)

But we're going to have this out!

SCOTT

We're ready, whenever you get around to it . . . if ever.

JANE

We'll see about that attitude of yours! We'll see! I'm late now, but don't think I'm going to forget it! By the way, you'll have to get your own supper.

SCOTT

We're capable of it.

JANE

Is that some kind of hint?

SCOTT

We've had practice cooking for ourselves. That's all.

EMMA

I'll get our supper, Mother.

JANE

All right. And remember, you're to do your homework before you go out anywhere. Curfew is 1:00 A. M.

SCOTT

For us . . . or you?

JANE

Your father's going to need more than fifteen minutes to lecture you, Mr. Smart!

EMMA

Let it go, Scottie!

JANE

(Consulting her watch)

Oh, it's late. I'll never be ready in time. But I don't intend to forget how you talked to me, Scott Paradine!

(She exits in a rush)

SCOTT

She doesn't even take enough time to cuss us properly.

EMMA

"Curse" is the right word.

SCOTT

Sometimes I feel like I was cursed.

EMMA

Scottie, what's the matter with us?

SCOTT

Me, you mean.

EMMA

No, us! Why don't we like . . . like life?

SCOTT

What life?

EMMA

Is it right? We find this box . . . these toys. Then, another blowup with mother.

SCOTT

The box didn't cause anything. Seems to me like I've been having blowups with her ever since I was born. She doesn't care any for us . . . not since we've been old enough to stay home alone!

EMMA

Daddy loves us.

SCOTT

When it's convenient. When he's not taking her some place . . . or when he's not locked up in his crumbly study vault working on some project or other.

EMMA

He needed a place to be alone.

SCOTT

So he builds a study with no doors or windows. He shut out the world, all right. And I guess . . . that includes us.

EMMA

Somehow . . . I feel better, now that we've found the box.

SCOTT

Yes. It may be the way . . . our way to . . .

Where? What?

EMMA

What's happening, Scottie? Are these toys . . .
our answer?

SCOTT

Maybe. I'm not sure.

(Bitterly)

What's the difference? Who cares?

EMMA

(Sadly)

Nobody . . . that we know of.

(After a slight pause, DENNIS PARADINE,
their father enters)

DENNIS

Hello, troops. Report.

SCOTT

Hi, how'd you shoot?

DENNIS

I slaughtered my opponent . . . slaughtered him
in sudden death.

EMMA

What's sudden death?

DENNIS

A golf term of no importance to a lovely lady.

EMMA

Mother's waiting.

DENNIS

Not too patiently, I assume.

EMMA

Something about the Crawfords.

DENNIS

Is that tonight? Ugh! I better change. Anything interesting today?

(DENNIS starts toward the hall)

SCOTT

Well, we . . .

DENNIS

(Disappearing)

Save it till I dress, huh?

(He goes out)

SCOTT

We'd better find some place to hide the box. She'll nag him into making a production of it.

EMMA

Why not just show it to them, then?

SCOTT

No, not yet. We don't know enough yet.

EMMA

We're learning, aren't we?

SCOTT

Bet your life!

EMMA

(Vaguely)

Funny . . . I have the . . . this odd feeling that I'm doing just that.

SCOTT

Later we'll show them . . . if we have to. It'll be too late then.

(Thoughtfully--intensely)

I don't understand the flam-to far before lastix muul!

EMMA

Oh, that's easy. I'll show you.

(Together they open the box and begin to work the abacus)

SCOTT

(Pointing)

Where'd this come from, Em?

EMMA

Home . . . I think. Birth, maybe. Wonderabab!

SCOTT

You may find it . . . the way . . . before I do, Em! Don't go without me!

EMMA

Not if I can help it.

SCOTT

You're understanding it so much faster than I. Please help me as we go.

EMMA

Sure. I will.

(DENNIS reenters, having changed from golf clothes to a suit)

DENNIS

(Irritated)

Okay. What box?

SCOTT

(Quickly replacing abacus in box and closing it; he and EMMA stand defensively in front of it)

Huh?

DENNIS

Don't play it stupid. I got the whole story from the Secretary of War . . . between layers of Avon calling.

SCOTT

There's no story, Dad.

DENNIS

What is it with you kids? What sort of box is this? What's in it? How many times have I asked you kids not to make waves in your mother's ocean! She always ends up rocking my boat!

SCOTT

Sorry for the inconvenience.

DENNIS

Just cut the sass, scout! You don't run the house yet!

SCOTT

You do?

EMMA

Scottie!

SCOTT

Sorry. Just forget it.

DENNIS

No, we won't just forget it! I want to see the box and its contents!

(JANE comes quickly on--dressed to the teeth)

JANE

(To DENNIS)

Have you found out what it is? Did you make martinis?

DENNIS

Which of those questions are you most interested to have answered first?

JANE

No need to be snide.

DENNIS

No, I didn't make martinis. You'll have to make them yourself . . . or struggle along till we get to the Crawfords. They'll probably have a washpot full of them!

JANE

Dennis, it isn't difficult to understand why you never became a comedian. Well, no matter. There's so little time. What about the box?

DENNIS

We were just discussing it.

JANE

Discussing! You're the head of this house! You

should be telling!

DENNIS

Then settle yourself, and let me get on with it.

(To SCOTT)

I'd like to see that box, please.

SCOTT

(Stiffening)

No.

DENNIS

I don't think you mean that, boy.

EMMA

Scott, maybe . . .

SCOTT

No!

JANE

Insolence!

EMMA

(To SCOTT)

They won't understand! What is there for them to care about? Don't make it more important than it is!

SCOTT

It's the most important . . .

EMMA

They just want to see. Then . . . that's all! Don't you understand?

DENNIS

There's been enough discussion! I'll have that box!

EMMA

It's nothing to him! Let him see it, Scottie!

DENNIS

Right now, Scott!

(After a pause of rebellion, SCOTT hands the box to DENNIS)

SCOTT

Here, take it!

(DENNIS begins to examine the box-- quizzically)

DENNIS

Here, what is this thing? What kind of box is this? This metal. I never saw this metal before.

(To JANE)

I never saw this kind of metal before.

JANE

What are you talking about?

DENNIS

I may not be the best engineer in the world, but I'm not the worst. This is an alloy I've never seen in my life!

(To SCOTT)

What is this, son? Something from school?

SCOTT

No. I don't know.

DENNIS

Where'd it come from . . . this box? The truth!

SCOTT

I don't know.

EMMA

We found it.

DENNIS

Found it where?

EMMA

In the park . . . by the duck pond. It was just there . . . in a honeysuckle bush.

DENNIS

Now listen, you kids . . . you didn't steal this?

SCOTT

Do you really think that about us?

DENNIS

All right! All right! I didn't throw you to the lions. I merely inquired. What's inside? How does this thing open?

(He begins to turn it over and around--
fumbling with it--prying at it)

EMMA

It was open when we found it.

DENNIS

Well, it's not now!

SCOTT

Emma closed it.

DENNIS

Scott, open it.

SCOTT

I can't yet. I don't understand.

DENNIS

You don't . . . what on earth are you talking about?

EMMA

I'm younger. It's easy for me to understand. I'll open it.

JANE

(To DENNIS)

It seems perfectly obvious to me that these children are playing some sort of prank. And you're going right along with it.

DENNIS

(Ignoring JANE, to EMMA)

Open it, then.

(EMMA takes the box and begins to work with it)

JANE

There's no lock or catch. It's some sort of gadget.

DENNIS

(To JANE)

All right.

(To EMMA)

Go on. Go ahead.

JANE

You children are too old for such games--especially you, Dennis.

DENNIS

Very funny.

(To EMMA)

Well, Emma?

JANE

You're going to feel foolish when some snake jumps out of there.

DENNIS

Then let me feel foolish--all by myself!

(EMMA completes the job. The box opens and DENNIS takes it back. He examines it)

No hidden spring that I can see . . . no . . . Okay. What's the joke?

EMMA

(To SCOTT)

See? I told you.

SCOTT

No joke, Dad.

(DENNIS looks at the contents of the box)

DENNIS

What's this--an abacus?

(Examines it)

No . . . it's not . . .

EMMA

No.

DENNIS

And this cloudy ball . . . It's not glass or plastic. What is this material?

SCOTT

We don't know.

JANE

Toys, at their age! Child's toys . . . space age nonsense!

DENNIS

(Curious)

Where'd you get all this? What store?

SCOTT

Dad, we told you. They were in the box we found!

JANE

Well, I'm relieved. I thought all sorts of things.

(To DENNIS)

We'd better get rolling--the Crawfords----

DENNIS

Wait a minute, now! I don't understand these toys. I don't know these substances!

JANE

Far be it from me to tell you your business, but isn't it just barely possible that some toy manufacturers may be making plastic materials that you don't know anything about?

DENNIS

Of course. But . . .

JANE

What seems more odd to me is the fact that our two grown children seem to be regressing to the point of playing with such junk.

DENNIS

No, I just don't like . . .

(To SCOTT and EMMA)

Come on, kids, explain these. Are they really toys?
I give up.

EMMA

Yes, sir. They're toys . . . we think.

DENNIS

You think? What do they do?

SCOTT

(Alarmed)

Emma! . . .

JANE

Can't this be discussed at a more convenient time?

DENNIS

I think . . . somehow . . . now is the best time.

JANE

Just as you say, of course, but it's your contract that's to be decided tonight. It's your firm that stands to lose if we don't make a good impression on the Crawfords. It's money out of your pocket. The fact that the whole family stands to lose as well needn't bother you, though . . .

DENNIS

All right! All right! You've made your point!

(To SCOTT and EMMA)

Can you kids get your own supper?

JANE

Emma's making it. There's plenty in the refrigerator.

DENNIS

Well . . . remember, homework before you go

any place.

SCOTT

We know . . . curfew at one o'clock.

DENNIS

Sharp. Oh, here's ten bucks apiece. Buy yourselves a motorcycle.

SCOTT

(Grinning at JANE)

Thanks, Dad.

(DENNIS tosses two bills on the table)

JANE

(To DENNIS)

All right, mother hen. May we go now?

DENNIS

Okay. But I want to talk to you kids . . . the first free moment I get.

SCOTT

Sure, Dad.

EMMA

Yes, sir.

(JANE shepherds DENNIS out in a hurry)

SCOTT

(Playing with the money Dennis left)

The first free moment he gets! Fooey!

(He tosses the money angrily away)

EMMA

Never mind. Hungry?

SCOTT

No. Let's work on that problem.

(They get out the toys and begin to work with them)

EMMA

What is it you don't understand?

SCOTT

Well, when this bead gets here it disappears all right.
I get that. But why do I get the greasy bead back?
And I get a shock on this step. Here it stings.

EMMA

Oh, I think I see where you're going wrong . . .
togacheg!

(She helps him adjust the abacus)

SCOTT

Oh, sure, I see it! Dumb me! Let me do it alone
now.

(He works with new fervor)

That's just right! That picture's right!

EMMA

I think we may get there sooner than we thought!
What's in the ball?

(Both strain to see inside the ball)

SCOTT

The same. They put out the fire. But, Em, look
what they're building! Something . . . something
. . . better!

EMMA

It's not this house any more! Oh, that new construc-
tion is something right than btwerpq.

SCOTT

Much more!

EMMA

Then that's the next stop-step!

(Excitedly they begin to work the toys
again--pointing out certain developments
to each other as they progress)

(The curtain is lowered briefly to denote
the passage of time)

CURTAIN