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Family Plays

Niccolo and Nicolette
or
The Puppet Prince

By
Alan Cullen



Niccolo and Nicolette

or

The Puppet Prince

Fantasy. By Alan Cullen. Cast: 4m., 2w., 2 either gender with doubling, or up to 14+ (6m., 5w., 3+ either gender) extras optional. Originating from England, this play is an ordinary fantasy, created from beguiling characters and written with the inimitable humor of Alan Cullen. A lovable old patent-medicine peddler named Seamus O'Shaughnessy, while visiting Nicolette in her toy shop, opens a forbidden box and releases a dancing puppet, which is promptly purchased by an imperious duchess. But the puppet comes to life, revealing himself to be a prince bewitched by a wicked magician. Since he must return to puppet status by rooster-crow, Seamus summons a furious little leprechaun to break the spell, who sends the little party to prevent the High Cockalorum from crowing. This proves a formidable enterprise, and they are obliged to call upon the leprechaun again, to restore the prince to his rightful place. *Production notes are available in the script containing drawings of set, as well as details on costumes, staging and plot. Four sets suggested. Fantastic costumes. Approximate running time: 70 minutes. Code: N65.*

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CHARACTERS

Nicolette
The Customer
Magnus the Magus
Seamus O'Shaughnessy
Niccolo, the Puppet Prince
The Duchess of Umbrage
Bugle, a Footman
The Leprechaun
The High Cockalorum
The Turk
Townsfolk
Dancers

SYNOPSIS

SCENE 1. A Toyshop
SCENE 2. A Country Road
SCENE 3. In Front of the Castle
SCENE 4. A Corridor in the Castle
SCENE 5. Magnus' Workshop

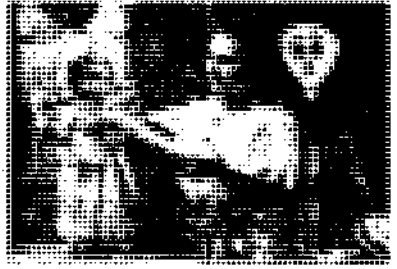
The premiere performance of this play was given in April, 1954, by the Bolton Little Theatre, of Bolton, Lancashire, England.

A second production of this play was later given by the Wigan Little Theatre, of Wigan, Lancashire, England. The photographs used in this book were taken from this production. The character studies on Page 5 are reproduced here by the kind permission of Mr. A. D. Miller; and the stage pictures at the beginning of each act are released by the courtesy of Mr. Roy Stevenson—both of the Wigan Little Theatre.

The pen-drawings for the settings, shown on Pages 6-7, and the production notes on Page 55, are provided through the kindness of the author, Mr. Alan Cullen, of Bolton, Lancashire, England.



The High Cockalorum



Nicollette



The Leprechawn



Seamus O'Shaughnessy



Niccolo



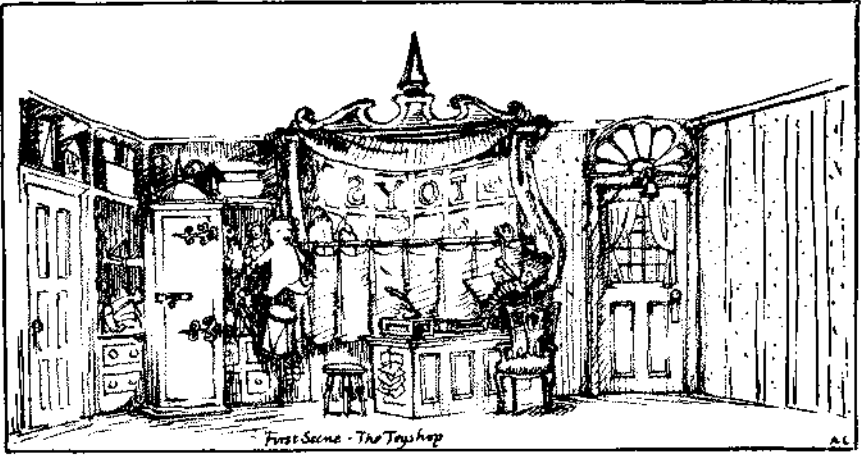
The Turk



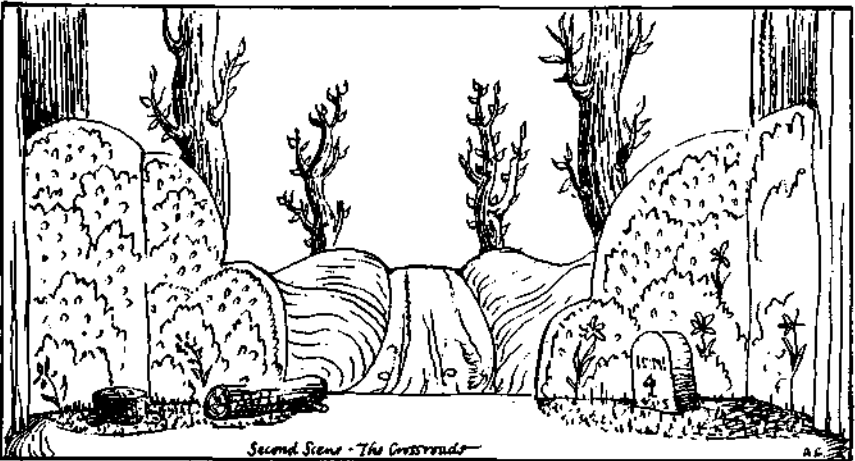
Magnus the Magus



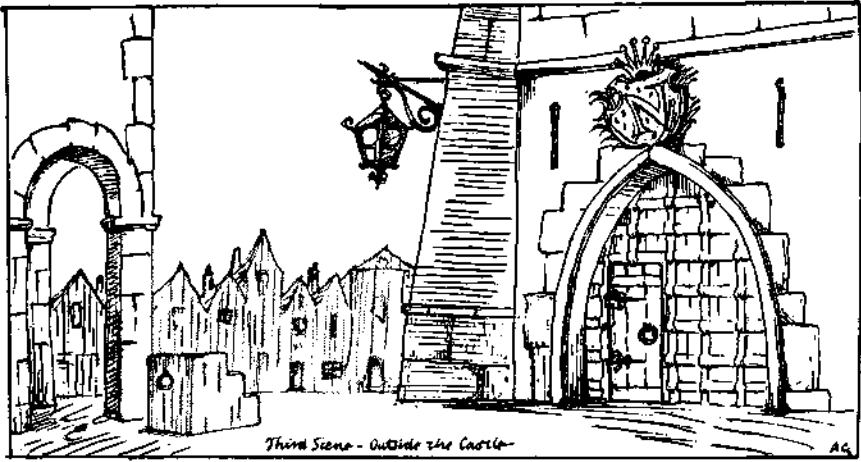
Duchess of Umbrage



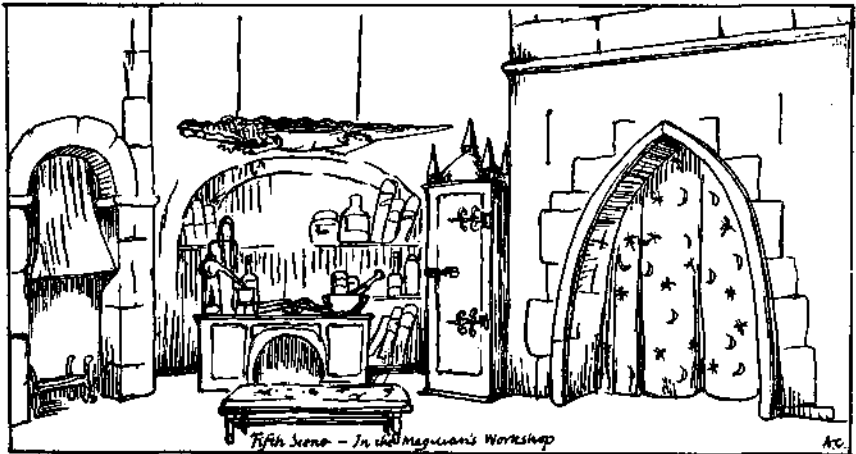
SCENE 1. The Toyshop



SCENE 2. The Crossroads



SCENE 3. Outside the Castle



SCENE 5. Magnus' Workshop

Production notes on this play will be found at the end of the book, covering:

Settings

Properties

Costumes

Style of Acting



SCENE 1.

The interior of a rather fantastic toyshop. Large dolls of different kinds, string and glove puppets, a model theatre, soldiers; very colorful but dark in the corners. A small counter with an account book and cash box. Among the toys a large, gaily-decorated upright box with a bolt on the outside. A chair and a stool or two. Dusk. A clock somewhere chimes musically the third quarter. Nicolette, a pretty girl in her 'teens, is sitting alone, stitching a doll. She finishes a stitch, bites off the thread and props up the doll on the counter.

NICOLETTE: There!—Almost finished, and very pretty too, although I do say it myself. Now all we want is for someone to walk right in and buy you on the spot, and everything will be just perfect!

(She looks up with a little frown.)

Which reminds me that I have sold very little this week. I don't know what Uncle Magnus will think, I'm sure, when he calls to check the accounts. However, I mustn't worry about that, and I *must* stop talking to myself, before it really becomes a habit.

(Footsteps are heard approaching the door.)

A customer!—Oh, I hope she buys lots and lots of things!

(Nicolette puts the doll down on the counter, then rapidly rearranges herself as the door bell jangles and the Customer comes in.—a woman, rather silly and affected.)

CUSTOMER: Oh, I'm so glad you're still open. It is getting late, though, is'nt it?

NICOLETTE: It is, rather. But we don't close until eight, you know.

CUSTOMER: Hasn't it been a wonderful day? I always think this is the best part of the year, don't you?

NICOLETTE: It has been nice. The evenings are drawing in, though.

CUSTOMER: Oh, now you've spoilt it. I hate people to say that. It makes it sound like winter already, and I can just *feel* my twinges beginning again. Do you get twinges?

NICOLETTE: No, I can't say I do. Not yet, anyhow.

CUSTOMER: You don't know how lucky you are. I'm a martyr to them, simply a martyr. But of course you shouldn't get them at your age. You're really very young to be looking after a shop all by yourself. Don't you find it tedious?

NICOLETTE: Not in the least. I love the shop and all the toys. I'm afraid I'm not a good saleswoman, though.—I hate parting with toys when someone buys them—they're like old friends. Uncle Magnus says I'm silly, but you *do* get fond of them, you know.

CUSTOMER: Is that the owner of the shop?

NICOLETTE: Uncle Magnus? —Yes, he's my guardian. I have no parents.

CUSTOMER: I'm sorry. Is he nice?

NICOLETTE: (*Doubtfully*) Ye-es. He's a little—sharp sometimes, but I don't think he means it. He's really been very good to me, letting me look after the shop and everything Can I—can I show you something?

CUSTOMER: Oh, of course—forgive me, I get carried away as soon as anyone mentions twinges Now what *did* I come in for? I'm sure there was something. You know my husband is always telling me I should make a *list*—he's such a methodical man himself—his pockets are simply *full* of lists!

NICOLETTE: Really?

CUSTOMER: Quite full. But I can't live that way. Even a knot in my pocket handkerchief is worse than useless to me. I can never remember what I made it for. —Isn't it silly?

NICOLETTE: Was it a toy of some kind?

CUSTOMER: Was what a toy?

NICOLETTE: What you came in for.

CUSTOMER: Oh, that. I suppose it must have been, otherwise I wouldn't have come to a toyshop, would I? —That's logical, you can't deny. My husband is always telling me to be logical.

NICOLETTE: (*Patiently*) I'm sure he must be.

CUSTOMER: I'll tell you what we'll do. You tell me all the things you have in the shop, and I'll stop you when we come to it!

NICOLETTE: Isn't that going to take rather a long time? —It is getting late, you know.

CUSTOMER: Well, of course, if you are not prepared to take a little trouble over your customers

NICOLETTE: Oh no, please . . . Was it a toy trumpet?

CUSTOMER: No. What would I want with a trumpet?

NICOLETTE: A skipping rope?

CUSTOMER: No, but it was something like that.

NICOLETTE: A top?

CUSTOMER: No.

NICOLETTE: Snakes and ladders?

CUSTOMER: Nothing like it.

NICOLETTE: A doll's house?

CUSTOMER: Now then, we're getting somewhere.

NICOLETTE: Was it a doll?

CUSTOMER: Yes it was!

NICOLETTE: This sort of doll?

CUSTOMER: How clever you are! That's exactly it.

NICOLETTE: Are you sure? We have others . . .

CUSTOMER: No, this is the thing . . . It is lovely—did you make it?

NICOLETTE: Yes.

CUSTOMER: You are clever.

NICOLETTE: Shall I wrap it for you?

CUSTOMER: What for?

NICOLETTE: Well, I thought you came in to buy it.

CUSTOMER: Buy it?—Good Heavens, no. I just wanted to see how it was made. I make my own, you see.

(She gets up.)

I have enjoyed our chat. Goodbye.

(She goes out.)

NICOLETTE: Well! . . . Wanted to see how it was made indeed! . . . and just look what a mess she has made of it . . . now I shall have to fetch some more cotton from upstairs to put that right . . .

(She props the doll up on the counter.)

Now you just sit there and wait till I get back.

(She goes to the inner door.)

Don't go away, will you?

(She goes out. There is a pause, then suddenly the doorbell jangles and the Magician comes in. He is a smallish, dark man of about fifty, who tries hard to be fierce but without a great deal of success. At the moment he is just irritable. He looks around the shop suspiciously, goes to the upright box in the corner and examines it anxiously, then, apparently satisfied, turns away and calls.)

MAGNUS: Nicolette! . . . Nicolette! . . . Drat the girl. Never where she should be. Nobody looking after the shop, either. Anybody could walk in and take the lot, lock, stock and barrel. Nicolette!

(Nicolette enters from the inner door. She stops and looks at him rather strangely and apprehensively.)

NICOLETTE: Yes, Uncle Magnus?

MAGNUS: How often have I told you not to leave the shop unattended?

NICOLETTE: I'm sorry. I only went for some more thread for my sewing. I . . . I haven't been away half a minute—

MAGNUS: Don't start giving me a lot of excuses! I won't have the shop left for a minute—not for a minute, do you understand? You never know who might be prowling about. There are some very valuable things in this shop, and don't you forget it!

NICOLETTE: *(She is about to say something then stops herself.)* No, Uncle Magnus.

(She goes behind the counter and continues with the doll.)

MAGNUS: I'm pretty sure I saw that good-for-nothing pedlar, that Seamus, for instance, as I flew down the street.

NICOLETTE: *(She looks keenly at him.)* As you did what, Uncle Magnus?

MAGNUS: Eh?

NICOLETTE: I thought you said "flew" down the street!

MAGNUS: *(Testily)* Don't be absurd!—And don't change the subject. I won't have that mountebank hanging about the shop. Even if he was a friend of your parents, he's a bad influence—lazy, idle . . .

NICOLETTE: *(Bridling a little)* I think you're mistaken about Seamus, Uncle. He's not really all you say. After all, he does come and talk to me occasionally. He cheers me up.

MAGNUS: Cheers you up! . . . What do you want cheering up for? You ought not to need cheering up if your mind was on your work. No gratitude, that's what it is—no gratitude, after all I've done for you.—Are you listening to what I'm saying?

NICOLETTE: Yes, Uncle Magnus.

MAGNUS: Oh, give me the account book before I really lose my temper. *(She gives it to him from the counter.)* Let me see how business is this week. *(He turns over the pages.)* And if it isn't better than last week I shall have to reduce your allowance. I might tell you it isn't easy to keep this place going and my own cas—my own house as well. *(He begins to add up the accounts, somewhat laboriously.)*

NICOLETTE: *(Screwing up her courage.)* Uncle Magnus.

MAGNUS: What is it?—Can't you see I'm busy?—Four and six and eightpence is—

NICOLETTE: How far is your castle?

MAGNUS: *(Not looking up.)* Fifty miles as the crow flies—when he flies straight, drat him. Five and two and elevenpence is . . .

NICOLETTE: Uncle Magnus . . .

MAGNUS: Don't keep interrupting! You're making me lose count. What do you want?

NICOLETTE: Why haven't you ever mentioned the castle before?

MAGNUS: Because I don't—Who said anything about a castle? I haven't got one. What are you talking about?

NICOLETTE: You said it just now. And you said it was fifty miles off. You *have* got a great castle, and you fly there and back every week

on the back of a great black crow. Don't you? *(He doesn't answer.)*
—I know you do, because I saw you arrive this evening from the upstairs window. You—you're a magician!

MAGNUS: *(Somewhat shaken by this.)* Rubbish! You're imagining things. Castles and crows! *(He laughs a forced laugh, which ends as an apprehensive cough.)*

NICOLETTE: *(Gaining courage.)* You're not being very convincing, Uncle. I've wondered about you for a long time, and now I'm sure. You *are* a magician, and you're

MAGNUS: *(In a great rage.)* That's enough! So you've been spying on me, have you? Watching me from the upstairs window, have you? All right, so now you know that much, you might as well know the rest. I *am* a magician, and I *do* fly backwards and forwards from the castle to the shop on the back of a big black crow. I only keep the shop going to keep you out of my way and give you something useful to do.

(He looks at the box.)

And I find it useful sometimes to . . . to dispose of things. I've been very lenient with you, Nicolette, but if you go on prying into my affairs I shall not be lenient any longer. I shall have to turn you into something—something that can't talk and spread gossip about me . . . like a puppet, for example.

NICOLETTE: You don't mean you can turn people into puppets?—how horrible!

MAGNUS: I thought that would shake you. Now remember—mind your own business and look after the shop properly, otherwise

(He picks up the doll she has been working on, looks at it ominously and throws it back to her.)

Now it's getting time I was back at the castle. I have a rather important little spell on the stove, and I don't want it to boil over.

(He goes to the door.)

Rather interesting—gives everybody pins and needles over a range of fifty miles.

(He turns to go.)

NICOLETTE: *(Firmly)* Uncle Magnus!

MAGNUS: *(Turning)* What is it now?

NICOLETTE: Now that I know you as you really are, I hope you realize I can't stay here any longer. The first opportunity I get, I intend to leave the shop and fend for myself, so—so I'm afraid you will have to get yourself another assistant. I—I'm giving you notice of termination of my appointment as from today. There!

(She stops and looks at him, defiantly.)

MAGNUS: Have you quite finished?

NICOLETTE: Yes, I have.

MAGNUS: Then I'll tell you something. I give *you* notice here and now that if I have any more of your nonsense, you'll find yourself dangling

from a string like the rest of these marionettes—a puppet that can't give its notice.

(He turns to the door, then remembers something and turns back.)

One more thing that I almost forgot.

NICOLETTE: Well?

MAGNUS: That cabinet in the corner.

NICOLETTE: I've wondered about that. It came this week. You never told me the price.

MAGNUS: *(In alarm)* Price? It has no price. It's not for sale. It mustn't leave this shop on any account—not on any account!

NICOLETTE: But you never said anything about it. What is it here for then?

MAGNUS: Never you mind. You are not to touch it. What's in it is no concern of yours. It's very, very precious. Yes, that's it—precious. And don't you think of opening it when I'm out of the way—*(Slowly)* not even if it asks you itself! You understand?

NICOLETTE: Yes, Uncle. Not even if it asks me itself. Anyway, I'm sure I should be terrified if it did When will you be back again?

MAGNUS: When I feel like it. *(He goes to the door.)* And don't forget—no spying from the upstairs window. *(He goes out.)*

NICOLETTE: Thank goodness he's gone. *(She goes over to the cabinet.)* I wonder why he told me that? If he hadn't told me there was something extraordinary inside I wouldn't want to look. I'm dying to know what it is. Something wonderful, he said. No, I mustn't open it. He would be terribly angry if he found out, and he frightens me so when he is angry. "Not even if it asks you itself", he said. I wonder if it will. Oh, I hope it does, even if I am a bit afraid of it. *(She goes away from it.)* I'd better leave it alone before something terrible happens. *(The door opens from the street, tinkling the bell as it does so, and Seamus O'Shaughnessy comes into the shop. He is a cheerfully eccentric character in a fantastic adaptation of Irish national dress, largely in tatters, and carrying a pedlar's pack.)*

SEAMUS: The top of the evening to you, me darling.

NICOLETTE: Seamus! You gave me such a start. I thought it was Uncle Magnus back again.

SEAMUS: The ould divil. He's after disappearin' down the street, mutterin' to himself as usual, and me concealin' myself till he was well out of it. Oh, he's a terrible man, that, with his skinny hands and his face like one o' the gargoyles on the top of the cathedral. But what call is there to be talkin' about him at all, when it's yourself I'm after callin' on to pay me respects?

NICOLETTE: I'm so glad you came, Seamns. I get so lonely in the shop except when you come to cheer me up with your nonsense.

SEAMUS: Nonsense, is it?

NICOLETTE: Beautiful nonsense. And I love it.

SEAMUS: That's better. But why did you jump when I came in at the door, —the way I was the banshee itself?

NICOLETTE: Oh, It's nothing really. Just—just the empty shop and everything—I get a bit jumpy sometimes.

SEAMUS: Och, it's a rich man I should be instead of a poor pedlar that has to live by his wits, such as they are. Then I could take you away out of this to a far couuntry where you'd be a fine lady and never be bothered with that ould miscreant of an uncle, bad cess to him. But I dou't know how it is—I can't sell as much of my Patent Panacea as will keep body and soul together, so I can't. I think the Sales Resistance of the local population is hardening against me more and more as every day goes by. Only yesterday for instance, I'm crying me wares as me custom is when an ould woman with a moustache pushes her way to the front of the crowd and says "Is it yourself" she says "that sold me a bottle for me corns a month ago?". "It is", sez I, "will ye come to the front here now and tell these lovely people what a power of good ye've had from it, and it only ninepence a bottle?". "I will indeed." sez she, and the wicked gleam she had in her eye—"I tried a thimbleful on the cow that's troubled the same way, and the poor creature lashed out so hard with her two hind legs that she lifted both me and the milking-stool into the duckpond". Ah, I'm thinkin' my physiognomy is getting a trifle too well-known in these parts.

NICOLETTE: (*Laughing*) I'm sorry Seamus. And I'm very grateful, too. I know you only stay near to keep an eye on me. I'm sure you would do much better if you went to another part of the country.

SEAMUS: And leave you with nobody but the ould spalpeen and a row of painted images? I may be only a pedlar, and a shady one at that, but the O'Shaughnessys have the blood of the Kings of Connaught in their veins and as long as there's a mouthful of breath in me body I'll be hanging about in case you need me.

NICOLETTE: Thank you, Seamus.

SEAMUS: Don't be after thankin' me till I'm able to help you properly. (*He puts down his pack and in doing so sees the cabinet.*)

And what would the like of this be now? This was never here the last time I was in.

NICOLETTE: (*Over to cabinet.*) Oh, please don't touch it, Seamus. Uncle Magnus is terribly particular about its being left as it is.

SEAMUS: What could be inside it, I wonder? If he's so particular there must be something worth takin' a peep at.

NICOLETTE: I don't know what it is. He said I was not to open it on any account, even if it asked me itself.

SEAMUS: Now that was a queer way of putting it. Is there magic in it, would you suppose?

NICOLETTE: There mst be. Boxes don't talk.

SEAMUS: That they don't. And they never will until somebody invents the wireless.

NICOLETTE: What's that?

SEAMUS: It's only an anachronism. Pay no attention to it. If there's something in there that he's not wanting people to see, that ould repobate is up to no good. I daresay it's a piece of loot from one of these mysterious jaunts he's always after going on. And wouldn't I like to know where he goes at the time, for he's never in the shop.

NICOLETTE: I don't know. But he did say it was precious.

SEAMUS: Precious. I'd swear by the Four Provinces 'tis a treasure he has locked away in there. Nicolette, me darlin', I think it's me duty as a citizen to open it. And me natural curiosity is even greater than me sense of duty, so stand back and we'll see.

(He makes to draw the bolt.)

NICOLETTE: No, Seamus. You're not to open it.

SEAMUS: Ah, where's the harm in one little peep? He'll never know.

NICOLETTE: No, Seamus.

SEAMUS: Not the teeniest, weeniest little peep?

NICOLETTE: No.

SEAMUS: No?

NICOLETTE: No, and that's final. Whatever we may think of Uncle Magnus it's his property, and we have no right to interfere with it.

SEAMUS: *(Affecting indifference.)* Ah, well, it's none of my business anyway. I'll be getting back to my peddling, Er . . . You don't happen to have a drop of tay on the hob maybe, just to put a little life into me before sending me on my way, do you?

NICOLETTE: I suppose you won't leave until you get it. But only one cup, mind, because it's almost closing time. I'll go and put the kettle on—and don't touch the box, Seamus, please.

(She goes through the inner door. Seamus eyes the box curiously.)

SEAMUS: Ah, where would be the harm? If I was just quietly to draw the bolt and take a quick peep nobody would be any the wiser.

(He touches the bolt, then draws away again.)

O'Shaughnessy, you're a weak and vacillating character. Control yourself, now.

(He stands in an agony of temptation, then finally gives in.)

It's no use. I'll just *have* to take a look while she's in the kitchen.

(He stealthily draws the bolt, peeps in, and shuts the door again quickly.)

Holy St. Patrick!

(He opens it again fully this time so that the audience can see it.)

There's a wonderful piece of work, now. Ah, the hours that must have gone into the making of that!

(In the open box is revealed a life-size figure of a young man, gaily painted and splendidly dressed in uniform. In gazing at it, Seamus does not notice Nicolette return quickly into the room.)

NICOLETTE: Seamus! After all I told you!

SEAMUS: Ah, now don't be taking on at me, Nicolette me dear. I—I'm

not a very strong-minded sort of a man, and it's not fair to put temptation in the way o' the likes o' me.

(Nicolette, meanwhile, has looked at the Puppet and stands gazing at it with clasped hands.)

And 'tis only another graven image after all the fuss. I—I suppose I'd better be shutting it in again.

NICOLETTE: *(Enraptured)* Don't shut it just yet, Seamus. It was very wrong of you, and I'm very angry with you, really, but it's so beautiful. —Look! It has eyelashes and fingernails and everything. It looks so real—it might almost be alive!

SEAMUS: I suppose for a doll it's human enough. But a doll it is. *(He lifts one arm and taps it, making a hollow wooden sound.)*

NICOLETTE: Look! There's a key in its chest. Do you think it's clockwork? Oh, I must see what happens. *(She winds it up, there is a loud whirr of mechanism, and the head straightens. She jumps away.)* Oh! It's moving! *(It opens its eyes with a click, then blinks with a series of rapid clicks. It raises one arm, then the other, and begins to walk out of the box.)*

SEAMUS: Did you ever see the like of that, now?

NICOLETTE: Sh! Let's see what it does now.

(The puppet starts to dance, woodenly. Seamus draws a pipe from his pocket and plays. The Puppet follows the rhythm and dances faster until it gives a loud whirr and stops.)

(Nicolette clapping her hands.)

It's marvellous, Seamus. I love it. We must make it dance again. I can't imagine why Uncle Magnus did not want me to see it, though. I think it was mean.

SEAMUS: Because he can't bear to see anyone enjoying themselves, that's why, the miserable ould . . .

NICOLETTE: Seamus! There's someone coming! *(Over to window.)* Oh, I hope it isn't Uncle Magnus. We must get it back to the box, quickly.

(SEAMUS hastily gives the handle a few turns, and as the figure starts to move he leads it back to the box. He has no time to close the door, so he stands in front of it. The figure is still working and throughout part of the following dialogue he is making desperate efforts to stop it raising its arms and legs and walking out of the box.)

Thank goodness! It's only a customer.

(The DUCHESS enters with a footman in attendance and occupies the only chair.)

NICOLETTE: Good evening, Madam. *(Curtseys)* May I show you something?

DUCHESS: *(Ignoring her and speaking to the Footman.)* Inform this young person who I am.

FOOTMAN: Yes, your Grace. You are addressing Her Grace, the

Duchess of Umbrage. She never converses with anybody below the rank of Baronet, except through me.

NICOLETTE: That must make conversation rather difficult.

FOOTMAN: It would if she weren't such an impatient woman. She never keeps it up long.

NICOLETTE: Oh. Will you ask her Grace, please, if she has anything particular in mind, or if she just wishes to look round the shop first.

FOOTMAN: The young person, Your Grace, wishes to know what it is you have in mind, or whether—

DUCHESS: Tell the young person I want the best she has in the shop naturally.

FOOTMAN: Her Grace—

NICOLETTE: Never mind. Please tell her that these are our best line.

They are very well made. They will last for years.

(Showing doll she has been finishing off.)

FOOTMAN: These are . . .

DUCHESS: Nothing lasts for years in the hands of my daughter.

Ermyntrude. Having had the most expensive possible education she is naturally completely uninhibited. She tears everything to shreds within an hour. Let me see that.

(Nicolette gives it to the Footman, who gives it to the Duchess.)

If that's the best you can do I am wasting my time.

(She gets up.)

NICOLETTE: Please don't go yet. I'm sure we have something your daughter would like.

DUCHESS: What's this?

NICOLETTE: That's Seamus, your Grace.

SEAMUS: I'm not for sale, your Majesty. I've no ambition to be torn limb from limb to find out if I'm stuffed.

DUCHESS: I mean this. *(Pointing past him to the box. Seamus hastily manages to get the door closed.)*

SEAMUS: You mean this box?

DUCHESS: Nonsense. I mean what's in the box.

NICOLETTE: The box belongs to the proprietor, your Grace. It is not to be opened.

DUCHESS: Of course it is to be opened. Boxes were made to be opened. Bugle, open the box.

(Bugle crosses to open the box.)

Stand aside, my good man. *(Seamus hastily scrambles out of the way.)*

NICOLETTE: *(Hastily)* But your Grace, you have not begun to look at the other things in the shop. I've a case full of things over here.

(Bugle has opened the door, and the Duchess now inspects the figure closely.)

DUCHESS: Ah! It seems to be mechanical. Just the thing! Ermyntrude will not rest for an instant until she has taken it apart, and it is large

enough to occupy her for several hours. Ah, there's a handle here. Wind it up, and demonstrate it for me, please.

NICOLETTE: Your Grace, that is impossible. Now over here, I have a model theatre, and actors to go with it—

DUCHESS: Rubbish! Nothing is impossible. Do as I say.

SEAMUS: Will I dance for you instead, your Grace? I can do the Walls o'Limerick like nobody's business.

DUCHESS: I am a woman of exemplary patience, but unless you do as I say at once, I shall not be responsible for the consequences. Bugle, operate that contraption!

(As Bugle winds up the puppet, Nicolette wrings her hands.)

NICOLETTE: Oh Seamus, I knew we should never have opened the box. *(The figure comes out of the box, dances again, and then whirrs to a standstill.)*

DUCHESS: Wonderful! I've never seen anything so natural. I'll take it.

NICOLETTE: Oh no, your Grace!

DUCHESS: Wrap it up at once.

NICOLETTE: Your Grace, I—I'm very sorry, but it's not for sale.

DUCHESS: Nonsense. Wrap it up.

NICOLETTE: But it really isn't for sale, your Grace. We can't sell it.

DUCHESS: Why not?

SEAMUS: Ye see it—er—it isn't finished, your honour.

DUCHESS: What's the matter with it?

SEAMUS: Eh?—the matter with it? Oh, er—it's in the mechanism—yes, the mechanism's very delicate, you see. It has an eccentric differential turbo-sprocket, and—er—in fact it's so eccentric it can't differentiate properly, and the—er—the ratchet-stabiliser doesn't connect with the—er—

(He tails off ineffectually.)

DUCHESS: Very well. You will have it rectified immediately. The carriage will call for it tomorrow morning. See to it. Tell the young woman I wish her good evening. The other person you may ignore. *(She sweeps out.)*

NICOLETTE: *(To Footman)* You can't take it away. You mustn't. Can't she be persuaded that it isn't for sale?

FOOTMAN: Nobody has ever managed to persuade Her Grace of anything in her life. She'll have it if she has to buy the whole shop. Sorry. *(He goes after the Duchess.)* She's set her heart on it, if she has any.

NICOLETTE: *(Sits on the chair.)* What *am* I going to do? *(Seamus closes the box and goes to her.)*

SEAMUS: I don't know to be sure. It's the devil of a fix, so it is, and it's all my fault. I ought to have my big mouth stuffed with the Stone of Blarney for openin' it at all.

NICOLETTE: Oh, it's as much my fault as yours. More, because it's really my responsibility. If she sends for it tomorrow and Uncle

Magnus finds it's gone, I don't know what will happen, but it's sure to be something dreadful. (*A clock strikes eight.*) Eight o'clock. Oh, well. It's getting dark. I suppose I'd better shut the shop. (*She gets up to go to the door. As the last stroke sounds a knock is heard.*) What was that? (*Looks out*) There's no-one at the door. (*Knocking repeated*) There it is again.

SEAMUS: It's in the shop. (*Knocking again*) Listen.

NICOLETTE: It's from the box.

SEAMUS: The Saints preserve us, so it is. Shall I . . . shall I take a look inside, maybe? (*Without enthusiasm.*)

NICOLETTE: Not again. We are in enough trouble already through doing that. I won't have it open again—even if it asks me itself.

VOICE FROM THE BOX: Open the box. Please open the box. (*Seamus and Nicolette cling to each other.*)

SEAMUS: It must have heard you, by all that's holy.

VOICE: Please let me out. Please. There is so little time. So little time. (*Knocking again.*) Open the box.

NICOLETTE: It's the puppet. I can't help it—I must let it out.

(*She runs over and unbolts the box. Nikki, the puppet, comes quickly into the room. His painted face is now normal makeup, but his costume is the same except for the handle in the chest which is not there now.*)

SEAMUS: It really is alive!

NIKKI: Yes, alive again at last and human—for a few hours. I'm free! You don't know what a service you have done me Nicolette.

NICOLETTE: But I don't understand. A few minutes ago you were just a wooden puppet.

NIKKI: Please sit down and I'll explain. But there isn't much time for it. I must get away whilst I have the chance.

(*She sits down and listens intently.*)

My name is Niccolo, Prince Niccolo, really, but everyone calls me Nikki. Some time ago Magnus placed me under a spell and seized my lands and my castle. He is very powerful and very wicked. His magic transformed me into a mechanical doll, so that he could keep me and gloat over my misfortune.

NICOLETTE: But you're not like that now—you're alive.

NIKKI: Yes, for a short time. You see, the magic spell was not complete, and now every evening at sunset I regain my proper shape, but it only lasts until first cock-crow and then I become a puppet again.

NICOLETTE: That's why he kept you locked in the box!

NIKKI: Yes, and forbade you to open it. And that's why he brought me here—because he knows it is too far for me to travel to my castle between sunset and sunrise. He knows I should change back again before I got there, and try to stop him completing the spell.

NICOLETTE: Poor Nikki. We must do something to help, mustn't we, Seamus?

SEAMUS: We must indeed. But the devil knows what.