

A DOLL'S HOUSE

(a new version by Claire Booker)

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CHARACTERS

Harold Helmer	A forty year old deputy bank manager
Nora Helmer	His wife - a vivacious housewife in her late 20s
Dr Rank	Their friend - a retired colonial doctor
Mrs Lee	Nora's old school friend
Nick Cruikshank	An ex-school friend of Harold's
Aunt Helen	Harold's maiden aunt, aged 40 to 60.

SET

England, 1955. A comfortable suburban living room filled with Utility furniture, but tastefully decorated. A door leads to the hall, backstage right. Another door leads to Mr Helmer's study. In the living room there is a sideboard on which stands a record player. A window gives onto the Helmer's front garden, and on the other side of the room, there is a gas fire with ornamental scuttle and tongs standing beside it. A wireless is located on the mantelpiece. It is winter.

ACT ONE

The lights rise on the scene above. Nora enters the living room, humming the latest popular tune. She is wearing a smartly cut coat with a fox fur lapel and is laden with carrier bags and an artificial Christmas tree.

Nora Aunt Helen!

Helen (enters from kitchen) Nora.

Nora Look. Isn't it wonderful?

Helen Mm.

Nora We'd better hide it. I want it to be a surprise.

Helen Under the stairs perhaps?

Nora Yes, yes. Hurry. (hands the tree to Helen)

Helen I've just made a pot of tea.

Nora Yes please. I'd love one.

(Helen exits with tree. Nora is in a happy mood. She switches on the radio, hums and does a little jive to herself as she removes her outdoor clothes. The radio is playing a popular '50s tune. She takes a bag of chocolates from her coat pocket and gobbles a few. Then creeps up to Harold's door and listens carefully) He's in there. Beaver away. (she sings along to the tune)

Harold (off stage) Is that my little love bird, singing her heart out?

Nora (happily) Yes darling. I'm back. (she goes over to her carrier bags and starts opening them)

Harold (calling her) Is that my little squirrelkins, rummaging away in the lounge?

Nora (hides the chocolates away and wipes her mouth) Yes, darling. Come and see what little squirrel's bought.

Harold (off stage) I'm just finishing the . . . (a moment later he emerges, pen in hand) Did you say bought?

Nora Yes. (indicates carrier bags) Bought.

Harold Oh dear. Squander Puss has been up to her old tricks again.

Nora Oh, Harold, can't we let ourselves go a bit? I mean, you'll be earning pots of money soon. And it is Christmas. (she giggles and dances up to him, singing) I saw three ships come sailing in, come sailing in, come sailing in . . .

Harold (he switches the radio off) We can't push the boat out yet, Nora.

Nora Oh, yes we can. (getting behind him she laughingly tries pushing him forward, exaggerating the effort required) Push, push, push. There'll be oodles and oodles of money any minute now.

Harold Not any minute. Next financial year. (affectionately) That's April to you, little squirrel brain.

Nora Pooiee. We can borrow 'til then.

Harold (he grabs her playfully by the ear) Ah, ah, ah. You listen carefully, now. What would happen if I borrowed £50 today, you spent it all over Christmas, and on New Year's Eve - a tile fell on my head and killed me.

Nora A tile?

Harold Well, not necessarily a tile. A number 37 bus would do just as well. My point, Nora. My point is as follows. How would you pay the money back?

Nora I couldn't.

Harold Exactly.

Nora But if you were dead, Harold, I really wouldn't care what happened. I wouldn't care if I didn't have two pennies to rub together.

Harold But I would. I'd have borrowed from the bank and you wouldn't be able to pay back the loan.

Nora Oh, they don't matter. They're strangers. We hardly know them.

Harold Heaven's above, Nora. You're missing the point completely. You know where I stand on this. A home that's built on debts is a shady, ugly place. It's no better than a prison. We've muddled through alright up to now, so we can jolly well keep our belts tightened until April.

Nora Yes, Harold. You know best.

Harold Don't sulk, squirrel. I hate it when you sulk.

Nora I'm not sulking.

Harold (he sighs and takes out his wallet) Well, well, well. I wonder what I have in my wallet?

Nora (joyfully) Oh darling.

Harold (holds up ten pounds and flutters it at her) Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without any presents.

Nora (quickly takes them from him) One, two, three, four, five; and another five! Oh, thank you, darling. Thank you. I should just about be able to manage now.

Harold I should hope so too.

Nora I will. I will. Oh do have a look at all the adorable things I've bought for the children. Real bargains, too. Look. (she pulls items out of the carrier bags)

Rompers for Bobby, and a toy gun for Johnny . . . (she points the gun at Harold playfully) Bang, bang, you're dead. Oh, and a real baby doll for Amy. Its eyelids move.

Harold She'll have pulled its head off by Boxing Day.

Nora Oh, and I got some cotton handkerchiefs for Aunt Helen. They're seconds, but she won't notice.

Harold And what's in this one? (lifts up a large parcel)

Nora (she stops him) No peeking until Christmas.

Harold (mock horror) Heaven forefend. Now, come and sit down and tell me what special little something I'm going to get you for Christmas? (he hugs her) Just say the word and it's yours.

Nora I don't want anything. Not a sausage.

Harold Impossible.

Nora No, really.

Harold Tell me what you want, Nora.

Nora I really don't want . . . well, actually darling . . .

Harold Ah, now we're getting somewhere.

Nora If you'd really like to please your little love bird. . .

Harold Of course.

Nora If you'd like to be really, really nice . . .

Harold Come on, come on. Out with it.

Nora You could give me some money.

Harold Money?

Nora Yes, cash. I could buy myself something with it later on.

Harold But Nora, that's hardly the idea.

Nora Oh, go on Harold. Please. I'll wrap it up in Christmas paper if you like. We can put it under the tree with all the other presents. Wouldn't that be fun?

Harold What's the name of that furry little creature that gobbles up all my five pound notes?

Nora Yes, yes, I know. The Squander Puss. But it does make sense for me to buy my own present, don't you think?

Harold No sense at all. If I leave you to your own devices, the money'll go on all sorts of silly bits and pieces for the house, and before I know it, there'll be nothing left to buy your present with and then I'll have to dip into my wallet again.

Nora Oh, but Harold . . .

Harold No if and buts, Nora. (chucks her under the chin) Squander Puss is an absolute poppet, but she gobbles up far too much cash. A Great Dane would be cheaper to keep.

Nora But darling, I save every penny I can.

Harold (laughs) I rest my case. You simply can't save, squirrel. Don't think I blame you. It's in your blood. Your father was just as bad. Always on the look out for easy money, but as soon as any came his way, it simply trickled through his fingers. You're a chip off the old block, I'm afraid.

Nora Poor dear Daddy. I would have liked to be more like him.

Harold (laughs) I don't think the beard and moustache would suit you, darling! (kisses her) You're perfect as you are. (looks into her eyes) Ooh, but do I detect some hidden look in those lovely eyes of yours? (he sniffs the air)

Nora What look?

Harold A guilty conscience, perhaps? (he turns her hands palms up and inspects them)

Nora Don't be silly, Harold.

Harold Let me see.

Nora (she looks at him defiantly) Well?

Harold (he licks her fingers) I was right. Someone has committed grand larceny in the sweet shop.

Nora I haven't bought a sweet for days.

Harold Not even a quarter pound of Chocolate Brazils?

Nora Cross my heart and hope to die.

Harold Are you sure?

Nora Yes.

Harold (indulgently) Well, you keep your little Christmas secrets to yourself. No doubt you'll confess them all after your second glass of sherry tonight.

Nora (suddenly remembering) Oh. Did you remember to invite Earnest?

Harold Of course.

Nora I'm really looking forward to tonight.

Harold I think I'll crack open the vintage Cockburns. (rubs his hands with glee) That'll put some fire in our engines. Oh, yes, we're going to have a jolly good time.

Nora And the children will love it. Earnest is such a tease.

Harold It is wonderful knowing one's position in life is at last secure. Knowing one's pay packet will be thoroughly up to scratch, that the scrimping and saving can end.

Nora Yes. It's like a miracle.

Harold No more hard times at the Helmers.'

Nora I've bought a real artificial tree this year. We've hidden it under the stairs. No more needles in the carpet. And after Christmas, do you know what I'm going to do . . . (the door bell rings) Are you expecting anyone? (she hurriedly starts to tidy up the room)

Harold It's too early for Earnest. Probably one of your ladies. I'll be in the study. (Harold exits to his study. Helen can be heard opening the front door and talking to a woman)

Nora (peeps behind the net curtains) What a dreadful hat.

Helen (talking to Mrs Lee) Just one moment. I'll go and see. (enters the living room) There's someone to see you, Nora. She says she's a friend.

Nora With a hat like that?

Helen Oh, and Dr Rank has arrived. He's coming in through the back.

Nora You'd better show her in then. (Helen returns to hall)

Dr R (enters, raises his hat to Nora) Salutations, Mrs H.

Nora (with pleasure) Earnest.

Dr R (heads for the study) The Sahib is in his study, I presume?

Nora (with pleasure) Yes, yes. Go through.

Dr R (admiring her) Lovelier than ever. (he enters the study where Harold greets him and the door closes)

Mrs L (Helen shows Mrs Lee into the living room. She is dressed in cheap outdoor clothing) Thank you. (she sees Nora) Nora?

Nora (holds out her hand) Good afternoon.

Mrs L You don't remember me, do you?

Nora (taking a closer look) Good Lord! Christine. Christine Morris.

Mrs L Yes.

Nora You look so old. (embarrassed) I mean . . .

Mrs L No, you're right. Nine years have taken their toll.

Nora Nine years? Gosh, and I've been so deliriously happy all that time. Oh it is nice to see you back in Tonbridge. Have you been here long?

Mrs L I arrived at King's Cross early this morning.

Nora Goodness. Well, you've certainly brought the weather with you. Let me take your coat. (she helps her off with her coat) Sit down by the fire. Go on. It'll warm you up. (they sit) What a wonderful Christmas surprise. Let me look at you. There is a bit of the old Christine left. A bit pale, perhaps . . .

Mrs L And older. A lot older, Nora.

Nora Just a touch tired under the eyes. The right powder can work marvels. (slaps her own wrist) Oh, but listen to me. Chin wagging away, and you . . . gosh, poor Christine. Daphne told me.

Mrs L So you know.

Nora In one of her interminably long Christmas letters. And my very first thought was, I must drop a line to poor dear Christine. But . . . well, you know how it is. And before you know it, three years have passed.

Mrs L Yes.

Nora It must have been a very difficult time for you. How dreadful it must be to lose one's husband.

Mrs L He didn't suffer too much at the end.

Nora That's a blessing. (pause) Were you well provided for?

Mrs L He left me virtually nothing.

Nora Oh. (pause) And no little ones either.

Mrs L No.

Nora How sad.

Mrs L Not even any great feeling of loss, actually.

Nora Oh.

Mrs L It wasn't much of a marriage, I'm afraid.

Nora But that's awful. That's dreadful. I've got such a lovely husband, and three adorable little monkeys. They're having their nap at the moment, but you'll meet them when they come down, and . . . oh but I want to hear everything. Absolutely everything that's happened to you.

Mrs L No, no, no. You go first.

Nora No. I'm not going to be selfish today. You have my ear and heart and soul and . . . oh, but there is one thing I must tell you. It's wonderful news. A simply marvellous stroke of luck.

Mrs L Oh?

Nora Would you believe, my husband's just been promoted. He'll be manager of his own bank. Just think!

Mrs L Oh, that is lucky.

Nora Yes. We're over the moon. He'll be on a huge salary and lots of percentages too. We'll be able to do just what we like. Oh, Chrissie, you've no idea what a relief that is. I mean, just imagine - heaps and heaps of money and not a care in the world.

Mrs L Yes, it must be lovely knowing you can pay the bills.

Nora Not just the bills. We'll be able to spend, spend, spend.

Mrs L (shakes her head indulgently) You haven't changed, have you? Even at school you were always splashing out.

Nora (laughs) You sound just like my husband. But I'm not as silly you think. We've both had to work jolly hard to make ends meet. Oh yes. I've worked too.

Mrs L You have a job?

Nora Well, not exactly. But I'm in production, as they say. Hand crafted cushions, embroidery, and other things besides. It all brings in a little extra. (pause) Poor Harold. Banking came as quite a shock after the civil service. He had a dreadful time the first year. Worked himself to the bone and ended up with tuberculosis of the lungs. You can imagine how I felt. The doctors said he only had a fifty fifty chance unless he stopped working completely for a year.

Mrs L Oh my goodness. What did you do?

Nora I took him to Switzerland.

Mrs L Switzerland! But wasn't that's dreadfully expensive?

Nora Ruinous.

Mrs L I can imagine.

Nora £1,365 to be precise. And the mortgage still had to be paid.

Mrs L So you paid with your savings.

Nora No. Daddy lent us the money.

Mrs L But didn't your father die around that time?

Nora Yes. 1949 was a terrible year. I couldn't nurse Daddy properly, and poor Harold was getting thinner and thinner. I really thought I was going to lose him too. (pause) Poor, dear Daddy. We went off to Basle and I never saw him again. That's the most miserable thing that's ever happened to me.

Mrs L But your husband recovered.

Nora Oh yes. He's as fit as a flea now. And so are the children. (leaps up) Yes. And so am I. Gosh, Chrissie. Isn't it just the most wonderful thing to be alive and happy. (pause) Oh no, there I go again. Talking about me, me, me. (kneels down beside Mrs L) You must think I'm a prize beast. Now you tell me about your husband. You did love him really, didn't you?

Mrs L Love isn't everything, Nora. I had a very sick mother and two young brother's to educate. When he proposed, I didn't feel I could say no.

Nora He was rich, then?

Mrs L Comfortably off. But his business was shaky. When he died it went bust.

Nora Golly. What did you do then?

Mrs L I had to make ends meet somehow, so I got a job.

Nora You too?

Mrs L In a factory. It's been a long hard slog. I can honestly say I haven't had one day's rest in all that time. But now it's over, Nora. My poor mother died this summer, and my youngest brother has landed a good job in insurance.

Nora That must be a weight off your mind.

Mrs L I suppose it is. It feels lonely though. (gets up restlessly) That's why I came back to Tonbridge. I was so cut off up in Scotland, and I should be able to find a better job down here. Something to take my mind off things. I've got 100 words a minute. Perhaps I could find work in a typing pool.

Nora A typing pool! But they're slave drivers, Christine. You look half dead already. What you need is a holiday.

Mrs L (goes to the window) I'm afraid I don't have a rich Daddy to pay for my trips abroad.

Nora You're angry with me, aren't you?

Mrs L I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound so bitter. (pause) Just now, when you told me about your husband's new job, I was thrilled . . . not so much for you, but for me.

Nora For you?

Mrs L Yes. I thought he might be able to pull a few strings and get me a position. I've become very self-centred, Nora.

Nora You genius! Why didn't I think of that myself? Chrissie. It's as good as in the bag. I'll drop a few little hints, very subtle . . . ah but first I'll get him in the right mood. (giggles) That's my forte. Oh Chrissie, why didn't you say before? I'm dying to help you. I know just what it's like to be without a penny.

Mrs L You're hardly in the same league, Nora.

Nora I've had to get my hands dirty too, you know.

Mrs L Embroidery?

Nora Why does everyone think I've got cotton wool between my ears?

Mrs L I don't mean to patronize . . .

Nora You're proud of all the sacrifices you made for your mother, aren't you?

Mrs L It's hardly how I would . . .

Nora But wait 'til you learn what I've done. Sssh. If Harold heard . . . He mustn't have an inkling, ever. No-one must know. No-one but you. You understand?

Mrs L Yes, but . . .

Nora I've done something absolutely wonderful. Just like you. (pause) I saved Harold's life.

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