

LITTLE NELL

A BURLESQUE MELODRAMA
MORTGAGE, TEARS AND EVERYTHING!

BY JOHN NASH

*Can be played as a short three-act
or a one-act, three-scene play*

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Back by popular demand! All the beloved characters are present - the large awkward, wig-wearing heroine, Little Nell; tall, slinky mustachioed villain, Carlton Bainbridge; and the affable, lovable, but-oh-so-slow hero, Hector Skyscraper. Revolving around the heavy plot of "Marry-me-or-I'll-foreclose," you'll want to cry with the heroine, hiss the villain and applaud the hero. This play's a favorite with community groups. One hour (can be lengthened or shortened).

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 men; 4 women)

or

(4 men; 3 women)

MA WILKINS: The mother.

PA WILKINS: The father.

LITTLE NELL WILKINS: The heroine.

HECTOR SKYSCRAPER: The hero.

CARLETON BAINBRIDGE: The villain.

THE PROMPTER: Always off-stage.

THE STAGE MANAGER: Always off-stage.

THE PLAY

The action takes place in the Wilkins' mortgaged farmstead.

Act I - Morning or evening

Act II - Noon or night

Act III - Night or day

Or curtain may be dropped to denote passage of time if used as a one-act play.

THE TIME: In the days of showboats.

PLAYING TIME: About one hour, but with the introduction of between-act specialties may be prolonged.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The play "Little Nell" is old-fashioned melodrama. It should be played as such, as broadly and studied as possible. However, one most important point is that the players must never lose sight of the fact that they are perfectly serious about the whole proceeding; they must not give the slightest impression that they, personally, are "trying to be funny." The deliberate seriousness in which they go about playing the parts makes for much of the humor. Early in rehearsals the group may find it hilarious; then less and less so to a point of being bored. Then is the time for the director to watch that they do not slip into "kidding the show" and do not become ridiculous rather than humorous.

As stated, action in stage directions and gestures is broad. Definite gesture accompanies every line of importance, whether or not the gesture is entirely logical. The script indicates where some occur; others will suggest themselves to the individual players. Illustrations from books on Elocution, published in the 1880s and 1890s, will give excellent details of how absurd some of these gestures may be.

In stage directions, the point of "centering" all important action directly center-stage should be made with deliberate absurdity. Nell faints, C; hero and villain fight C; Hector and Nell embrace C. Many traditional methods of handling characters on the stage are now discarded or modified to make them more natural and in keeping with modern production methods. The director should call on all the tricks of the air-sawing, scenery chewing, strutting, pacing school of acting to elaborate and round out the suggestions given in the text of the play. Walking-on lines, facing front, turns, up-staging, building up the "dramatique" exits at doorways, simulating fights and embraces, should all come in for polite ridicule.

The parts of the Prompter and Stage Manager should be played in the same spirit as the play and not in the manner of modern characters of the producing group.

THE PROLOGUE

BEFORE THE CURTAIN

(A CHARACTER, dressed in an old-fashioned costume, steps out before the FOOTLIGHTS. If a woman is used, she gives a deep curtsy; if a man, he makes an elaborate bow.)

THE PROLOGUE: Ladies and gentlemen; In presenting our play, "Little Nell," for your entertainment, we wish to take you back through the years to those days when the showboats plied the Mississippi.

You will recall reading in such novels as Edna Ferber's "Showboat" how these old floating theaters traversed the entire course of the inland rivers, stopping wherever a wharf afforded an opportunity to dock and wherever dwellers along the banks afforded an audience for their plays.

You will recall also how the audience joined wholeheartedly into the spirit of the show, applauding the valiant hero and winsome heroine, and hissing the evil plotting of the villain.

We ask you now to forget the progress of the world since those days; forget your inhibitions; imagine that you are sitting on the Floating Palace The-a-ter, listening to the slap, slap of river waves against the sides, and waiting for the play, "Little Nell," to start.

If you admire our hero - applaud him; if you hate the villain - boo him; if you want to weep at the plight of Little Nell and her worried parents - by all means weep. But use your own handkerchiefs or buy more in the lobby between acts. *(PROLOGUE curtsies or bows elaborately.)* Thank you kindly for your indulgence! *(With a sweeping gesture.)* We give you "Little Nell." On with the play! *(PROLOGUE exits.)*

ACT I

(NELL'S Home Sweet Home. AT RISE: Before the curtain rises, House LIGHTS go off. Then the FOOTLIGHTS flash off and on. Suddenly there comes violent and enthusiastic HAMMERING; it stops just as suddenly.)

PROMPTER: *(Backstage.)* Places! *(Louder.)* Hey, places! *(The HAMMERING starts again.)* Stop that pounding; the audience is waiting! *(The HAMMERING stops.)* Sure that wig will stay on, Nell?

NELL: Sure. Just like my own hair.

PROMPTER: See that it does! Last night it fell off four times. Places! Hey, Ma - straighten your hair. You look like the last of the Mohican's, mother. *(A pause.)* Ready?

VOICES: Sure. Ready. Let 'er rip.

PROMPTER: All right. On with the show. Pull the curtain!

(The CURTAINS part, catching MOTHER and FATHER out of character. They assume their characters, sitting stiffly in chairs beside the fireplace, facing the audience. During the dialogue they address each other by rolling eyes rather than turning heads.)

MOTHER: *(After swallowing a case of stage-fright.)* My! My! What a storm is without! *(There is a pause while nothing happens.)* My! My! What a storm is without!

FATHER: *(As nothing happens.)* Yes! Yes! *(THUNDER is heard at last.)* A terrific storm. Gracious. Look at that lightning! *(Pause.)* I said - looka-that-lightnin'! *(LIGHTS blink.)*

MOTHER: *(Shivers violently.)* The moaning wind is terrifying. *(WIND effects - just too late.)*

FATHER: Ah, yes! Lend an ear to the mournful howling of the wolves! *(Pause - FATHER stretches his neck toward the window and a very "human" dog YAPS.)* Where - is little Nell? *(Jumps to HIS feet.)*

MOTHER: She went to pick daisies by the brook. Oh! How she does love to pick daisies by the brook.

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FATHER: She is by the brook in this terrible storm? *(The dog YAPS.)*

PROMPTER: *(Frantically.)* THUNDER! Thunder!

FATHER: *(Thinking the PROMPTER was prompting HIM.)*

Oh! Thunder! *(The cue for thunder is finally picked up, the THUNDER sheet rattles.)*

MOTHER: Carleton Bainbridge is with her.

FATHER: *(Registering relief.)* Ah! She is with Carleton! I am relieved. *(HE starts to sit in the chair, finds he is sitting in front of it and staggers backward until he sits.)* I am very much relieved! *(HE leans his hand on the fireplace.)*

MOTHER: Carleton Bainbridge! What a beautiful, lovely specimen of manhood he is! Each foot a gentleman! Every inch a gentleman!

(The weight of FATHER'S hand proves too much for the fireplace and it falls over. The STAGE MANAGER'S hand comes in the window and we hear a "phist - phist" as he motions for Father to restore the fireplace to its original position. Father sees him and does so.)

MOTHER: 'Tis true, he is twenty-two years, three months and eleven days her senior, but we know she will be well protected within his loving arms. It was so gracious of him to pay up the mortgage on our dear home.

FATHER: Ah, yes! They would have foreclosed tomorrow, had he not come to my rescue!

MOTHER: *(Attempts to rise, steps on HER dress, sits again, untangles her dress from her foot and rises to stand facing directly front, her head jerks to the R as she says her line, her body remaining facing the audience. She points directly R her arm stretched to the fullest extent.)* Here comes our dear little Nell now! Oh! Nittle Lell! I mean, Little Nell!

FATHER: My dear little daughter Nell! *(Rises stiffly, delivering HIS line straight front.)*

PROMPTER: *(Offstage.)* Where's Nell? It's her entrance!

STAGE MANAGER: Nell! Nell!

VOICES: *(Backstage.)* Nell! Nell!

End of Freeview

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