

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

THE ACTION TAKES PLACE IN AN ANGLO-IRISH HOUSEHOLD IN 1912. IN THE BLACKOUT WE HEAR THE RINGING OF A SMALL HAND-BELL. THE LIGHTS COME UP TO REVEAL A CHILD'S NURSERY. THERE IS A FADED, DUSTY, EDWARDIAN QUALITY ABOUT THE ROOM AND THERE IS A LARGE ROCKING HORSE IN THE CENTRE OF THE ROOM. ALSO, ON A TALL STAND NEAR THE WINDOW IS AN ELABORATE BIRD CAGE WITH A CANARY INSIDE. THE BACK WALL OF THE NURSERY IS HALF PANELLED WITH THE TOP PORTION COMPRISING A FROSTED GLASS SCREEN; THIS GLASS PARTITION ALLOWS THE AUDIENCE A SENSE OF MOVEMENT ALONG THE TOP CORRIDOR OF THE OLD HOUSE. A YOUNG WOMAN, NIAMH, STANDS LOOKING OUT OF A LARGE OPEN WINDOW. THERE IS JUST THE SUGGESTION THAT SHE HAS BEEN CRYING AND IS PERHAPS WIPING A TEAR AWAY AS SHE STANDS AT THE WINDOW.

OFFSTAGE THE SMALL HAND-BELL RINGS AGAIN AND REPEATS AT INTERVALS. THE YOUNG WOMAN DOES NOT MOVE. AFTER A SHORT WHILE A YOUNG BUT CRIPPLED WOMAN IS SEEN TO MOVE DOWN THE CORRIDOR AT THE REAR OF THE NURSERY AND THEN DISAPPEARS INTO ANOTHER OFFSTAGE ROOM. WE HEAR THE SOUND OF WOMEN'S VOICES BUT EXACTLY WHAT IS SAID IS NOT DISCERNIBLE. AFTER A SHORT INTERVAL THE WOMAN, DEIRDRE, MOVES BACK ALONG THE CORRIDOR, STOPS AND THEN TURNS AND HEADS BACK TOWARDS THE NURSERY. WE HEAR THE TAP OF HER STICK IN THE CORRIDOR UNTIL SHE FINALLY ENTERS THE ROOM.

DEIRDRE

She's been ringing her bell for the past ten minutes. Did you not hear?

NIAMH DOES NOT ANSWER AND CONTINUES TO LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW.

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

I said...

NIAMH

I heard.

DEIRDRE

Then why didn't you go to her?

NIAMH

You know why.

DEIRDRE

It's hard for me to get up and down those stairs quickly.

NIAMH

You manage well enough.

DEIRDRE

Sometimes it would be nice if you'd take your turn.

NIAMH

If it's a problem, I'm sure Mrs. O'Connell can set a maid to it.

DEIRDRE

You know that's not what I meant. If just once in a while...

NIAMH

She likes it best when you go.

DEIRDRE

You don't know that.

NIAMH

Don't I?

DEIRDRE

And what happens if I'm not here?

NIAMH

You're always here.

DEIRDRE

But when I'm not?

NIAMH

It won't be my problem after tomorrow.

DEIRDRE

You can walk away just like that?

NIAMH

Yes.

DEIRDRE

Whatever's happened in this house, Niamh, she's still family.

NIAMH

Not to me.

DEIRDRE

She'll always be your mother.

NIAMH

She gave birth to me, that's all.

DEIRDRE

You can be very cruel.

NIAMH

No, Deirdre; cruel is what she's become. Me? I'm just indifferent.

DEIRDRE

Why can't you just see things from her point of view? She never recovered from your birth...

NIAMH

And I've been blamed ever since.

DEIRDRE

Nobody blames you, Niamh. But she's sad.

NIAMH

We're all unhappy in this house.

DEIRDRE

She wanted so much for us all .

NIAMH

A touching thought.

DEIRDRE

You've broken her heart.

NIAMH

I doubt that.

SILENCE

DEIRDRE

She asked after you today.

NIAMH

Really.

DEIRDRE

Wanted to know about the wedding.

NIAMH

Why?

DEIRDRE

She has it in mind to be brought down for the ceremony.

NIAMH

I don't want her there.

DEIRDRE

She asked me not to say anything.

NIAMH

You should have taken her advice.

DEIRDRE

You're wrong about her. Despite what you think, she still cares about you.

NIAMH

I'm not interested.

DEIRDRE

She's picked out a dress already.

NIAMH LOOKS HORRIFIED.

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

Surely, just for one day...

NIAMH

I said no.

DEIRDRE

I'm sure it's what father would want.

NIAMH

I doubt that; a woman beside him who's been a stranger for the last seventeen years.

DEIRDRE

Not by her choice.

NIAMH

You can't be blind to the way things are.

DEIRDRE

They're still husband and wife.

NIAMH

In name only.

DEIRDRE

He still visits her everyday.

NIAMH

Duty, that's all.

SILENCE. DEIRDRE RECONSIDERS HER APPROACH

DEIRDRE

You should spend some time with her; she might have been confined to her bed all these years, but she still knows a thing or two about this family and about what goes on in this house.

NIAMH

I doubt that.

DEIRDRE

You might be surprised.

NIAMH

What is this, Deirdre? More stories? There've been far too many of those in this house.

DEIRDRE

Talk to her.

NIAMH

I don't want to.

DEIRDRE

Is it so wrong for us to behave as a family on your last day here?

NIAMH

Nice dream.

DEIRDRE

Please.

NIAMH

Don't beg, Deirdre; there's nothing so unattractive as a cripple begging.

SILENCE

NIAMH (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.

DEIRDRE

No. You shouldn't.

NIAMH

Forgive me.

DEIRDRE

There's always a price to pay for forgiveness.