A LITTLE PRINCESS

laid a finger on it.

(As MISS MINCHIN boxes her ears, BECKY screams and runs off.)

MISS AMELIA. (Walking away.) Oh dear, Maria!
MISS MINCHIN. Hush!

(They exit.)

SARA. (Standing in the room, still, clenching her teeth, very upset.) The wicked, cruel thing! The cook takes things himself and then says Becky steals them. She doesn't! She's so hungry sometimes that she eats crusts out of the ash barrel!

(ERMENGERDE, in awe, lighting a candle for a closer look at SARA.)

ERMENGERDE. Sara, are—are—I don't want to be rude, but—are you ever hungry?
SARA. Yes, Yes, I am. I'm so hungry now that I could almost eat you. And it makes it worse to hear Becky. She is hungrier than I am.
ERMENGERDE. (Suddenly.) Oh, Sara! What a silly thing I haven't thought of!
SARA. Of what?
ERMENGERDE. Something splendid! This very afternoon my nicest aunt sent me a box. It's got cake in it, and little meat pies, and jam tarts and buns, and oranges. I'll get it this minute.
SARA. Yes, and won't you invite the prisoner in the next cell?
ERMENGERDE. Yes!

SARA knocks twice. We hear two knocks in return.

SARA. She is coming. We can pretend it's a party.

(BECKY arrives, eyes red, cap sliding off, rubbing her face nervously because of ERMENGERDE's presence.)

ERMENGERDE. Don't mind me a bit, Becky!

(ERMENGERDE exits.)

SARA. Ermengarde has asked you to come in because she is going to bring a box of good things up here for us to eat ...

BECKY. (Confused.) ... to eat, miss? Things that's good to eat?
SARA. Yes, and we are going to pretend a party. (This scene should be played with a sense of urgency and with the abandon and innocence of young girls in a pretend game. They are having a great time.) We must hurry and set the table.

BECKY. Set the table, miss? Wot'll we set it with?
SARA. There doesn't seem to be much .... (Seeing ERMENGERDE's red shawl, lights change to fantasy.) Here's Ermie's shawl. I know she won't mind. It will make such a nice red tablecloth.

(They dress the table.)

BECKY. Yes, miss.

(Very serious rapture.)

SARA. What next, now? (BECKY waits, completely taken in.) I know! (She finds a dozen white handkerchiefs left in her trunk. She shows BECKY and arranges them on the table.) They are the richly embroidered napkins. Nuns worked them in convents in Spain.

BECKY. (Truly amazed.) Did they, miss?
SARA. You must pretend it. If you pretend it enough, you will see them.

BECKY. Yes, miss.

(BECKY, closing her eyes, twisting her face in strange convulsive contortions, her hands hanging stiffly clenched at her sides, looking as if she was trying to lift some enormous weight.)

SARA. (Shocked.) What is the matter, Becky? What are you doing?

BECKY. I was a-'pretendin', miss, I was tryin' to see it like you do. I almost did. But it takes a lot o' stren' th.
SARA. Perhaps it does if you are not used to it. I shouldn’t try so hard just at first.

(ERMENGERDE has come in with her basket of food.)

SARA. Look, Erminie, a banquet hall. “What, ho, there, minstrels! Strike up with your viols and bassoons.”

(ERMENGERDE empties her basket of all the food.)

ERMENGERDE. It’s like a real party! BECKY. It’s like a queen’s table.

(A mini dance-like procession/dance, SARA leading the way, waving her hand graciously to ERMENGERDE and BECKY.)

SARA. Advance, fair damsels and be seated at the banquet table. My noble father, the king, who is absent on a long, long journey home, has commanded me to feast you.

(Footsteps on the stairs and everything stops. BECKY drops her piece of cake on the floor. Lights change back.)

BECKY. It’s the missus! STOP

(The door is flung open. MISS MINCHIN enters followed by MISS AMELIA.)

MISS MINCHIN. I have been suspecting something of this sort, but I did not dream of such audacity. (She boxes BECKY’s ears again.) You impudent creature!

(SARA stands very still. ERMENGERDE begins to cry.)

ERMENGERDE. We’re—only—having a party. My aunt sent me the hamper.

MISS MINCHIN. So I see, with the Princess Sara at the head of the table. (To SARA.) This is your doing, I know. Erminarde could never think of such rubbish. (Stamping her foot at BECKY.) Go to your room! (She runs off, face hidden in her apron. To SARA.) I will attend to you tomorrow. You shall have neither breakfast, dinner nor supper! Erminarde! I shall have to write to your papa. What would he say if he knew where you are tonight? Playing childish games with common scullery maids. (She sees SARA, still, thinking.) What are you thinking of? Why do you look at me like that?

SARA. I was wondering.

MISS MINCHIN. What were you wondering?

SARA. (Simply, sadly, quietly.) I was wondering what my papa would say if he knew where I am tonight. MISS MINCHIN. You insolent, unmanageable child! (Pushing ERMENGERDE towards the door with the hamper of food.) I will leave you to wonder. Come along, Amelia! MISS AMELIA. (Alone with SARA for just a moment, at a total loss for words. She wants to comfort SARA, but doesn’t do so well.) M-M-Merry Christmas ... Saa.

SARA. Merry Christmas, Miss Amelia. (SARA, left with EMILY, picks her up.) There isn’t any banquet for Emily, and there isn’t any princess. (We see RAM DASS’s face in the window: SARA does not. She is at the end of her exhaustion, totally demoralized. She slowly goes to the bed muttering as she falls asleep.) I can’t pretend anything else. There wouldn’t be any use in trying.

(Late EMILY takes DOLL EMILY from SARA. The focus image is of the live EMILY as she turns her head and the DOLL’s head and looks out the attic window. Black out—quick change.)

Scene 10

(RAM DASS and EMILY transform the attic room.)