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# A Shakespearian Conference.

~~Shakespearian~~

BY PAULINE PHELPS

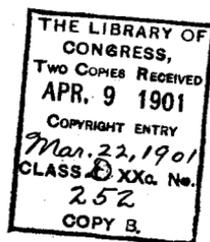
## CHARACTERS:

CLEOPATRA.	ROMEO.
LADY MACBETH.	HAMLET.
JULIET.	MACBETH.
DESDEMONA.	SHYLOCK.
MISS CAWDOR, one of the three witches in "Macbeth."	

SCENE: A room in DESDEMONA'S apartments, furnished as an ordinary sitting-room, with the addition of some Moorish armor, ornaments, etc.

CLEOPATRA [*outside*]. Hold the barge at the turn of the East river. As I am Egypt's queen I will be obeyed. [*Enters, and looks about indignantly.*] No hostess? Well, I might have expected it! Desdemona runs things in such a slipshod fashion. If it wasn't for my being so interested in the royalties I wouldn't have come! [*Takes card from her pocket and reads.*] "You are invited to a Shakespearian Conference at the house of Othello, the Moor of Venice, Thursday afternoon. Subject: The Unpopularity of Shakespeare's Plays, and the Remedy for It." And a remedy is needed, goodness knows, or I'll have to sell my barge to pay my board bill! I dare say Desdemona will come in presently, with her hair loose, and wearing one of those dismal tea-gowns—enough to drive a sane

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man distracted! If the world only knew how trying she was, they wouldn't have blamed Othello in the least. Well, anyhow, I'll have time to arrange my serpents.

SHYLOCK [*outside*]. See that the table is laid in the long hall, and be not too liberal in dishing the cream. [*Enters, and salutes CLEOPATRA.*] I bid you welcome, royal lady!

CLEO. Oh, great pyramids, you're not invited to this conference, are you?

SHY. Invited? Why, the fair Desdemona has made me master of ceremonies!

CLEO. You don't mean it! [*Aside:*] She must owe him a lot!

SHY. And why should I not be? I have moneys—three thousand ducats in my pockets—

CLEO. Oh, for the sphinx's sake, stop talking about those three thousand ducats. We've all heard it until we're tired! And to think that I—I, Egypt's queen—have to wear paste diamonds and plated serpents because my real ones are in pawn. If we can't arrange something at this meeting to boom Shakespeare and collect more royalties, I'm sure I don't know where my spring bonnet is coming from.

SHY. It's terrible—terrible! "The Merchant of Venice" to run only two weeks—but 'twas the manager's fault! He cut my speeches and gave prominence to Portia! She, who by her learned speech about the pound of flesh minus the drop of blood, robbed the play of its proper interest—

CLEO. After dressing up in men's clothes to influence the jury! I'm no prude, as all Egypt knows, but there are some things—well, I hope *she* isn't coming.

SHY. She's not invited—nor Bassanio—I have looked out for that.

CLEO. Bassanio? Oh, well, that's different! [*Arranges hair consciously*]. There's no reason why he shouldn't come.

SHY. "He has disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains; scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains; cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew!"



PR2 879  
-P7

CLEO. [*weariedly*]. Why do you talk shop? I am Egypt's queen, but I don't keep insisting upon it. But tell me who are expected. Any men?

SHY. Romeo.

CLEO. [*sweetly*]. Indeed! "I knew, by that same eye, there's some good news!" He quotes poetry pleasantly.

SHY. Juliet, his wife.

CLEO. Oh, his wife? I never did care much for her. Everybody knows that she threw herself at Romeo's head. Will Shakespeare kindly wrote it, that he came to the balcony, but I have it on the best authority that she and the Nurse waylaid him on his way to church.

SHY. Then there's Lord and Lady Macbeth.

CEEEO. [*scornfully*]. What, all in pairs? We'll be a jolly company!

SHY. Lord Hamlet—

CLEO. And Ophelia, too, I suppose?

SHY. No, she's out bicycling.

CLEO. Oh, yes, I remember she had the craze. The last time I saw her she was singing "Sing a down—and a down—and you call him a-down a--oh, how the wheel becomes it!"

SHY. Hamlet has put the bicycle in pawn to me, but out of courtesy I let Ophelia use it this afternoon. Though "there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves," I manage to get along. Not a Christian who once scorned me but since has borrowed money. The fair Portia now often calls at my lowly shop, and bids me charge whatever usances I wish—a pound of flesh and blood and all, she's willing, so that I wring it from her husband. Romeo and Juliet are pining in cheap lodgings, and even Macbeth has felt poverty's sting, which is sharper than a serpent's tooth; while, as for yourself—

CLEO. "Wherefore is this noise?" I know I'm in debt to you,—everybody is; but even Egypt's queen of fire and air must live. If we can only hit on some way to popularize our plays and increase our royalties—

JULIET [*outside*]. "Here's such a coil! Come, what says Ro-

meo?" Oh, here you are at last! I tell you I demand an explanation. You were out until two o'clock last night and three the night before—

CLEO. Always quarreling—even upon the balcony, where all the neighbors can hear!

VOICE [*announcing outside*]. Mr. and Mrs. Romeo Montague!  
[*Enter ROMEO and JULIET. SHYLOCK goes forward effusively.*]

SHY. I salute you, most noble lady and kingly gentleman.

JUL. [*staring haughtily around*]. How-dy-do, Shylock? Really, this is very strange. Where is our hostess, Desdemona?

ROMEO [*taking CLEOPATRA'S hand*]. "If I profane with my unworthiest hand—"

JUL. Romeo! [*He slinks back to her side.*] You know she's not in our set!

ROMEO [*hastily*]. I know, my dear, I know, but still "her beauty hangs upon the cheek of night—"

JUL. So actressy—and wrinkled deep with time, she owns it herself. The way you men flatter her vanity is ridiculous.

CLEO [*to SHYLOCK*]. "What says the married lady?" Why, she won't even let poor hen-pecked Romeo shake hands. It's just as that clever fellow Iago says: "Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ." [*To JULIET*]. I'm thankful, madam, that the green-eyed monster doesn't trouble my dreams.

JUL. [*cuttingly*]. I suppose you can't find any one to be jealous of!

CLEO. "You lie up to the hearing of the gods." I am Egypt's queen, and Antony—

JUL. The less said about that the better!

CLEO. [*starting toward her*]. "So, have you done?"

JUL. What's that to you?

ROMEO. Juliet—my dear—Juliet! For shame, forbear this outrage!

[*Rushes between them. Both women turn upon him.*]

JUL. Let me alone, Romeo Montague! It isn't your business—

CLEO. And I'd have you understand that I can manage my own quarrels—

JUL. A man never knows any more than to interfere—

CLEO. They're always around when no one wants them—

JUL. Yes, especially Romeo—

ROMEO [*retiring to corner*]. Oh, "I am fortune's fool!"

SHY. [*crossing over to him*]. I hope you remember my interest coming due to morrow week, hey!

ROMEO. "Oh, teach me how I should forget to think!" We came here to see how we could get more money, not to be dunned for what we owe. If those royalties—

ALL [*eagerly*]. What about the royalties?

VOICE [*announcing*]. Lord and Lady Macbeth, and Miss Cawdor.

LADY MACBETH [*outside*]. "Out, damndèd spot! Out, I say!"

[*Enter MACBETH, followed by LADY MACBETH and MISS CAWDOR, who is stirring with a long spoon the contents of a small iron pot.*

LADY MACBETH should be made up as a very stout, elderly woman and should wear a red wig.]

LADY M. [*apologetically, as she rubs her nose with her handkerchief, and scrutinizes her face with a small hand-mirror*]. You'll excuse my exclamation, but the soot from the cars is something fearful! I hope you won't mind my bringing the First Witch. [*Indicates MISS CAWDOR.*] She's a little queer here, you know [*touches forehead*], but she made such a fuss about coming, and Macky—

MACBETH [*theatrically*]. "Thou canst not say I did it! Never shake thy gory locks at me!" Why didn't you send her back?

LADY M. Well, Macky, everyone knows she's related to us on the Cawdor side, and it don't seem as if we ought to go back on our relatives

MISS CAWDOR [*stirring pot*]. "Double,  
double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble."

SHY. [*advancing toward them*]. Welcome, most noble Lord and Lady!

MAC. [*starting back*].

“Avaunt! and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!  
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold.  
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes  
Which thou dost glare with!”

SHY. It wasn't *much* of a speculation, but you know the interest came due last Monday week—

MISS CAWDOR. “Liver of blaspheming Jew,  
Gall of goat and slips of yew—”

LADY M. S-s-sh! [*Apologetically*.] I hope you won't mind her. She don't mean anything.

ROMEO [*advancing to LADY MACBETH*]. “Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight? For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night!”

JUL. [*sternly*]. Romeo! [*He hurries toward her*] I know you go around quoting that foolish poetry to everyone who will listen, but I wouldn't pick out married women.”

VOICE [*announcing*] My Lady Desdemona.  
[*Enter DESDEMONA, languidly, carrying pillow. All start toward her.*]

CLEO. At last!

ROMEO. Ah, sweet Desdemona!

JUL. [*aside*]. How she has faded!

LADY M. I hope you are well, dear.

DESDEMONA. No, I'm quite poorly, thanks. You know I never have regained my health since I was smothered. [*Places pillow under her head and leans back in chair languidly.*]

MAC. Perhaps, like me, you're troubled with insomnia. Last night “methought I heard a voice cry, ‘Sleep no more.’”

CLEO. He's begun. [*Resignedly.*] He does rant so.

MAC. [*continuing*]. “To all the house, Macbeth shall sleep no more—”

LADY M. And he wouldn't let anybody else in the house sleep any more, either. Nightmare is hereditary with him on the Glamis side.

MISS CAWDOR [*chanting and stirring the kettle*].

“Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,  
Witches’ mummy, maw and gulf—”

LADY M. S-s-sh! It’s nothing but porridge!

DES. You must excuse me not being down to meet you, but you know Othello’s gone to the Philippines, and I made arrangements with Shylock, when I lent my house for the conference, that he must attend to all the details. Is everybody here?

SHY. My Lord Hamlet will doubtless be late. He dropped into a seance to talk with his father’s ghost on the way down.

CLEO. Never mind him! I saw him once, and he treated me as if I were a serpent of the Nile! I, as Egypt’s queen, will call the meeting to order. Attention!

[*All the ladies talk at once.*]

DES. Well, seeing it’s my house and I’m Othello’s wife—

LADY M. And I received all the guests at the banquet at the castle—

JUL. And I am president of the Rainy Day club—

CLEO. [*more loudly*]. Attention!

[*They continue.*]

DES. ’Twould be showing more courtesy—

LADY M. And better manners—

JUL. And I’m sure I don’t know what right she has, anyhow—

CLEO. [*rapping baton on table*] Attention!

MISS CAWDOR [*pointing toward CLEOPATRA*]. “Thrice the brindled cat hath mewed—”

LADY M. Sh-h! [*To CLEOPATRA*:] I hope you won’t mind her.

CLEO. The purpose of this meeting, ladies and gentlemen, is, as you all know, to devise some means of increasing our royalties.

SHY. The ducats! “The ducats! And the manager bound—”

JUL. Yes, by yearly contract.

MAC. The trouble with Shakespeare’s plays is, there’s not enough melodrama. I ought to kill more people, and in full view of the audience. As a pleasant innovation, I might, at the next performance, murder Lady Macbeth, Miss Cawdor, and all the people at the banquet.

LADY M. Well, I'm sure, Macky, I wouldn't consent to play if you decided on any course like that.

ROMEO. I don't agree with you, worthy Thane. I've been around to all the continuous performances—

SHY. "Four thousand ducats at a sitting!" That's where my interest goes.

ROMEO [*with dignity*]. At all the continuous performances, and I tell you Shakespeare's plays need vaudeville features—contortionist dancing and a few good jokes.

MISS CAWDOR [*dancing*].

" The weird sisters, hand in hand,  
Posters of the sea and land,  
Thus do go about, about,  
Thrice to thine and thrice to mine,  
And thrice again to make up nine—"

LADY M. S sh-sh! I hope you won't mind her! She always did want to go in the ballet!

ROMEO. Now, for instance, when Juliet says, "How camest thou hither—tell me?"

JUL. [*continuing*]. "And wherefore? The orchard walls are high and hard to climb?"

ROMEO. I could say: "Why did I scale the orchard wall? Because you are a peach!" Though in that case I should want another Juliet.

ALL THE LADIES. Another Juliet!

DES. Well, I'm sure, if Othello didn't get jealous—

CLEO. [*starting forward eagerly*]. "Give me my robe—put on my crown!"

SHY. Not unless you pay for it.

CLEO. [*continuing*]. "I have immortal longings in me—"

JUL. [*indignantly*]. Another Juliet, indeed! Who but myself could deliver those immortal lines:

" Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,  
Toward Phœbus lodging; such a wagoner  
As Phæthon would whip you to the West—"

MAC. Not melodramatic enough! "The attempt, but not the deed, confounds us!"

CLEO. [*scornfully*]. Fiery-footed steeds, indeed; when everyone knows that the horse has gone out, and the automobile has come to stay! That speech is hopeless.

LADY M. Well, I'm sure I do my best for Shakespeare, and my pose in the Sleep-Walking Scene has been so much admired that Bartholdi modeled his Statue of Liberty after it. [*Rises.*] But something is wrong somewhere.

CLEO. [*thoughtfully*]. It may be the costumes. My entrance from my barge is effective, but think of requiring a woman to wear a dress that has been out of fashion three thousand years. If I could don a Paris ball-gown, cut décolleté—my neck and arms are beautiful.

VOICE [*announcing*]. My Lord Hamlet!

[*Enter HAMLET.*]

SHY. Welcome, most worthy Danish prince. [*Confidentially.*] How much longer do you expect me to hold those sables, eh?

HAM. "O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else? And shall I couple hell? Oh, fie! Hold, hold, my heart; and you, my sinews, grow not instant old, but bear me stiffly up." Twenty pound for a suit of sable, and second-hand at that! "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain! My tables, meet it is I set it down, that one may smile. And smile and be a villain!"

SHY. "Many a time and oft on the Rialto have you rated me about my moneys and my usances. Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, for sufferance is the badge of all our tribe. It now appears you need my help—"

MISS CAWDOR [*chanting*]. "I will drain him dry as hay—"

LADY M. S sh sh! I hope you won't mind her!

CLEO. We are wandering from the subject. My Lord Hamlet, have you anything to say on how Shakespeare's plays can be made more popular?

HAM. "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue! But if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines." [*The listeners fidget uneasily.*]

CLEO. Yes, yes, we're all familiar with that, but—

HAM. "Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may—"

MAC. Temperance! Temperance would kill my murder scene.

HAM. [*continuing*]. "May give it smoothness. Oh, it offends me to the soul—"

JUL. [*despairingly*]. He's bound to finish it!

HAM. [*continuing*]. "To hear a robustious, periwig pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings—"

[*Desperate attempts at interruptions*]

CLEO. Yes, but to return to the subject—

DES. And as Oattie used to say—

LADY M. Now, my idea is—[*Pantomime of despair as HAMLET continues.*]

HAM. "The ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I could have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod. Pray you, avoid it!" [*Pauses dramatically.*]

MISS CAWDOR. "Peace! The charn's wound up!"

LADY M. S sh-sh! [*Apologetically to HAMLET:*] I hope you won't mind her! Some of your speeches appeal to *me* very strongly. Now that one about "O would that this too, too solid flesh would melt!" [*Fans herself.*]

JUL. I don't see that his advice has helped the success of Hamlet, though. At the last performance the only pay-people in the house were a class from a young ladies' seminary! At this rate, in ten years from now Shakespeare won't be played at all.

DES. Well, I'm sure I don't care very much. No one that hasn't tried it knows how uncomfortable it is to be smothered.

JUL. That's because your husband earns enough to take care of himself, and you, too. I would to Heaven mine did

ROMEO [*to CLEOPATRA*]. "Oh, that I were a glove upon that hand—"

JUL. Romeo! [*Aside.*] Just what he used to say to me. Those speeches were impromptu then, but he's learned them all by heart since.

CLEO. [*to ROMEO*]. "I'll give thee, friend, armor all of gold; it was a king's."

SHY. Don't forget my interest!

JUL. Romeo! [*He leaves her.*] Really, if I had known this was going to be such a mixed company, I don't believe I should have come.

CLEO. [*tragically*]. Say'st thou so, Capulet's daughter? I am Egypt's queen—

JUL. I don't care if you are a queen; and making all allowances for Shakespeare's slandering you, as you say, your flirting is something disgraceful!

ROMEO [*meekly*]. "I'll be a candle-holder, and look on. The game was ne'er so fair, and I am done."

CLEO [*to JULIET*]. "I have a mind to strike thee e'er thou speak'st!"

MAC. But to return to the play—

HAM. "The play's the thing!"

SHY. And the royalties!

LADY M. Yes, we really ought to do something, if we only knew what to do!

CLEO. I, as Egypt's queen, suggest— [*Sweeping across the stage.*]

MISS CAWDOR. "By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes."

LADY M. Sh-sh sh! I hope you won't mind her.

JUL [*looking at her with interest*] Why, that Miss Cawdor is really quite clever at times!

LADY M. [*to CLEOPATRA*]. You needn't look so cross. "Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it. That's my motto."

CLEO. The trouble is, we have no play that affords full scope for genius!

ALL. That's what we want—full scope for genius!

DES. I wish they'd talk lower. My head has never been strong since I was smothered! If you want a different play, I don't see why you don't go to work and write one! [*They all look at each other for a moment.*]

MAC [*after pause*]. Why, that's not so bad!

JUL. Then we could all have our parts especially written to suit ourselves.

CLEO. And our costumes especially designed for us.

DES. And I needn't be smothered!

HAM. "Right; you are i' the right. And so, without more circumstance at all, I hold it fitting that we shake hands, and start."

SHY. I'll make the notes. [*Takes out book and pencil, while they all gather around him.*]

CLEO. Of course, we must have a barge.

JUL. [*aside*]. When everybody knows she came over on the ferry! [*direct:*] and a balcony with a fire-escape attachment—

MAC. [*dramatically*] "And a thousand daggers!"

MISS CAWDOR [*chanting*]. "A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap—"

MAC. [*fiercely*]. But no witches!

ALL. No—no witches!

LADY M. [*admonishingly*]. Dear, you know she's your relative!

CLEO. And no ghosts!

HAM. "Get thee to a nunnery!" No ghosts? How, then, my speech! "Remember thee! Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe. Remember thee! Yea, from the table of my memory—"

CLEO. You can address the speech to the heroine instead. The heroine should always have half-a-score of lovers—

JUL. Of course. Some in the balcony, and other below it.

DES. Only don't have them get jealous, because that is so trying.

CLEO. But rivalry there must be,—two lovers, young and handsome—

MAC. And a third to slay them both! That will be the leading part!

ROMEO. The leading part? Why, that's for me to play.  
[*Strikes attitude and recites:*]

“Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel:  
Wert thou as young as I, Juliet, thy love,  
An hour but married, Tybalt murdered,  
Doting like me, and like me banished,  
Then mightst thou speak, then mightst thou tear thy hair,  
And fall upon the ground, as I do now,  
Taking the measure of an unmade grave.” [*Falls.*]

JUL “Oh, Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?”—  
With your best clothes on, too.

HAM. The leading part for you? No, no! [*Strikes attitude.*]  
“To be, or not to be,—that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles—”

MAC. [*breaking in.*] Philosophy has gone out! [*Recites:*]  
“Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal—”

SHY. No, no, gentlemen, I play the leading part myself, and  
say,—

ALL. You! Ha-ha. [*Laugh jeeringly.*]

SHY. “What should I say to you? Should I not say:  
Hath a dog money? Is it possible  
A cur should lend three thousand ducats?

Or

Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,  
With bated breath, and whispering humbleness,  
Say this:

‘Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;  
You spurned me such a day; another time  
You called me dog; and for these courtesies—  
I'll lend you thus much moneys?’ ”

CLEO. Yes, at twenty per cent. Now, Shylock, what qualifications have you to play the part of a lover.

SHY. My three thousand ducats—

CLEO. Those ducats again!

SHY. Which would buy the costumes, paint the scenery, and launch the play upon the sea of fortune? [*All look amazed.*]

LADY M. Well, there is something in that—

SHY. “Aha! I have them on the hip.”

JUL. In the Balcony Scene he mightn't be so bad. It's real dark down there in the garden. After all, it doesn't matter about the hero; the heroine is the most important feature!

ALL THE LADIES. Oh, yes, the heroine!

CLEO. I, of course, as Egypt's queen—

JUL. Your age renders that out of the question. As the youngest, I,—

LADY M. A woman of weight and presence is what is now required. Now I,—

DES. Well, I've heard that beauty is the most important thing, and I'm sure that no one could go on about my looks as Oattie did before I was smothered—

SHY. Ladies! [*Trying to attract their attention.*] Ladies!

CLEO. “Prithee, go hence; or I shall show the cinders of my spirit through the ashes of my chance. Who dares compete with me, whom kings have worshipped? Get thee gone—”

JUL. Indeed, I will not! What about my Potion Scene,—the grandest thing in English literature? You could play my nurse, however.

CLEO. Nurse, indeed! “Slave, soulless villain, dog! Oh, rarely base!”

ALL THE MEN. Ladies! ladies!

LADY M. Prithee, peace! I am not to be lightly thrust aside. Look at my qualifications, a murderer and somnambulist!

MISS CAWDOR [*dancing*]. “Cool it with a baboon's blood, Then the charm is firm and good.”

DES. Yes, but you're so fat!

LADY M. Thou'rt mad to say it! “Come, thick night, and pall

thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes."

DES. "Heav'n have pity on me!"

CLEO. [*to JULIET*]. You a heroine—a forward schoolgirl—

JUL. At least, I don't wear paste jewels and a wig!

CLEO. Slave! Call my barge! I will go hence! [*Starting toward the door.*]

SHY. Ladies, ladies, what about the royalties!

[*They all turn toward him.*]

LADY M. I scorn royalties if I'm not allowed my rights!

JUL. Royalties! Then give me my Balcony Scene—

DES. And I must plead with my hair down—

CLEO. And I must kill myself with an asp!

SHY. "Father Abram, what these Christians are!"

[*Omnes.*]

CLEO. "Come, thou mortal wretch, with thy sharp teeth this knot intricate of life untie—"

JUL. "And madly play with my forefather's joints,  
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud—"

ROMEO. What ho, apothecary!"

DES. [*singing*]. "Sing willow, willow, willow—"

HAM. [*despairingly*]. "Mother, mother, mother!"

MISS CAWDOR [*chanting*]. "Round about the cauldron go—"

LADY M. "Infirm of purpose, give me the daggers!"

MAC. "Lay on, Macduff!"

SHY. [*tearing up the note-book*]. Silence, silence! "I am not well. Let me go hence." The conference is ended; and Shakespeare's plays must remain as they are.

[CURTAIN.]



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