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In the Shadow of the Glen

by J. M. Synge

January, 1999 [Etext #1618]

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IN THE SHADOW  
OF THE GLEN

by J. M. SYNGE

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

First performed at the Molesworth Hall,  
Dublin, October 8th, 1903.

PERSONS

DAN BURKE (farmer and herd) . George Roberts  
NORA BURKE (his wife) . . . Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh  
MICHEAL DARA (a young herd) . P. J. Kelly  
A TRAMP . . . . . W. G. Fay

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

SCENE. -- {The last cottage at the head of a  
long glen in County Wicklow.

Cottage kitchen; turf fire on the right; a bed near it against  
the wall with a body lying on it covered with a sheet. A door is  
at the other end of the room, with a low table near it, and  
stools, or wooden chairs. There are a couple of glasses on the  
table, and a bottle of whisky, as if for a wake, with two cups, a  
teapot, and a home-made cake. There is another small door near  
the bed. Nora Burke is moving about the room, settling a few  
things, and lighting candles on the table, looking now and  
then at the bed with an uneasy look. Some one knocks softly at  
the door. She takes up a stocking with money from the table and  
puts it in her pocket. Then she opens the door.}

TRAMP

{Outside.}

Good evening to you, lady of the house.

NORA

Good evening, kindly stranger, it's a wild

night, God help you, to be out in the rain falling.

TRAMP

It is, surely, and I walking to Brittas from the Aughrim fair.

NORA

Is it walking on your feet, stranger?

TRAMP

On my two feet, lady of the house, and when I saw the light below  
I thought maybe if you'd a sup of new milk and a quiet decent  
corner where a man could sleep {he looks in past her  
and sees the dead man.} The Lord have mercy on us all!

NORA

It doesn't matter anyway, stranger, come in out of the rain.

TRAMP

{Coming in slowly and going towards the bed.}  
Is it departed he is?

NORA

It is, stranger. He's after dying on me, God forgive him, and  
there I am now with a hundred sheep beyond on the hills, and no  
turf drawn for the winter.

TRAMP

{Looking closely at the dead man.}  
It's a queer look is on him for a man that's dead.

NORA

{Half-humorously.}  
He was always queer, stranger, and I suppose them that's queer  
and they living men will be queer bodies after.

TRAMP

Isn't it a great wonder you're letting him lie there, and he is  
not tidied, or laid out itself?

NORA

{Coming to the bed.}  
I was afeard, stranger, for he put a black curse on me this  
morning if I'd touch his body the time he'd die sudden, or let  
any one touch it except his sister only, and it's ten miles away  
she lives in the big glen over the hill.

TRAMP

{Looking at her and nodding slowly.}  
It's a queer story he wouldn't let his own wife touch him, and he  
dying quiet in his bed.

NORA

He was an old man, and an odd man, stranger, and it's always up

on the hills he was thinking thoughts in the dark mist. {She pulls back a bit of the sheet.} Lay your hand on him now, and tell me if it's cold he is surely.

TRAMP

Is it getting the curse on me you'd be, woman of the house? I wouldn't lay my hand on him for the Lough Nahanagan and it filled with gold.

NORA

{Looking uneasily at the body.}

Maybe cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him, -- and every night, stranger, -- {she covers up his face and comes away from the bed}; but I'm thinking it's dead he is surely, for he's complaining a while back of a pain in his heart, and this morning, the time he was going off to Brittas for three days or four, he was taken with a sharp turn. Then he went into his bed and he was saying it was destroyed he was, the time the shadow was going up through the glen, and when the sun set on the bog beyond he made a great lep, and let a great cry out of him, and stiffened himself out the like of a dead sheep.

TRAMP

{Crosses himself.}

God rest his soul.

NORA

{Pouring him out a glass of whisky.}

Maybe that would do you better than the milk of the sweetest cow in County Wicklow.

TRAMP

The Almighty God reward you, and may it be to your good health.

{He drinks.}

NORA

{Giving him a pipe and tobacco.}

I've no pipes saving his own, stranger, but they're sweet pipes to smoke.

TRAMP

Thank you kindly, lady of the house.

NORA

Sit down now, stranger, and be taking your rest.

TRAMP

{Filling a pipe and looking about the room.}

I've walked a great way through the world, lady of the house, and seen great wonders, but I never seen a wake till this day with fine spirits, and good tobacco, and the best of pipes, and no one to taste them but a woman only.

NORA

Didn't you hear me say it was only after dying on me he was when the sun went down, and how would I go out into the glen and tell the neighbours, and I a lone woman with no house near me?

TRAMP

{Drinking.}

There's no offence, lady of the house?

NORA

No offence in life, stranger. How would the like of you, passing in the dark night, know the lonesome way I was with no house near me at all?

TRAMP

{Sitting down.}

I knew rightly. {He lights his pipe so that there is a sharp light beneath his haggard face.} And I was thinking, and I coming in through the door, that it's many a lone woman would be afeard of the like of me in the dark night, in a place wouldn't be so lonesome as this place, where there aren't two living souls would see the little light you have shining from the glass.

NORA

{Slowly.}

I'm thinking many would be afeard, but I never knew what way I'd be afeard of beggar or bishop or any man of you at all. {She looks towards the window and lowers her voice.} It's other things than the like of you, stranger, would make a person afeard.

TRAMP

{Looking round with a half-shudder.}

It is surely, God help us all!

NORA

{Looking at him for a moment with curiosity.}

You're saying that, stranger, as if you were easy afeard.

TRAMP

{Speaking mournfully.}

Is it myself, lady of the house, that does be walking round in the long nights, and crossing the hills when the fog is on them, the time a little stick would seem as big as your arm, and a rabbit as big as a bay horse, and a stack of turf as big as a towering church in the city of Dublin? If myself was easily afeard, I'm telling you, it's long ago I'd have been locked into the Richmond Asylum, or maybe have run up into the back hills with nothing on me but an old shirt, and been eaten with crows the like of Patch Darcy -- the Lord have mercy on him -- in the year that's gone.

NORA

{With interest.}

You knew Darcy?

TRAMP

Wasn't I the last one heard his living voice in the whole world?

NORA

There were great stories of what was heard at that time, but would any one believe the things they do be saying in the glen?

TRAMP

It was no lie, lady of the house. . . . I was passing below on a dark night the like of this night, and the sheep were lying under the ditch and every one of them coughing, and choking, like an old man, with the great rain and the fog. Then I heard a thing talking -- queer talk, you wouldn't believe at all, and you out of your dreams, -- and "Merciful God," says I, "if I begin hearing the like of that voice out of the thick mist, I'm destroyed surely." Then I run, and I run, and I run, till I was below in Rathvanna. I got drunk that night, I got drunk in the morning, and drunk the day after, -- I was coming from the races beyond -- and the third day they found Darcy. . . . Then I knew it was himself I was after hearing, and I wasn't afeard any more.

NORA

{Speaking sorrowfully and slowly.}

God spare Darcy, he'd always look in here and he passing up or passing down, and it's very lonesome I was after him a long while {she looks over at the bed and lowers her voice, speaking very clearly,} and then I got happy again -- if it's ever happy we are, stranger, -- for I got used to being lonesome.  
{A short pause; then she stands up.}

NORA

Was there any one on the last bit of the road, stranger, and you coming from Auhgrim?

TRAMP

There was a young man with a drift of mountain ewes, and he running after them this way and that.

NORA

{With a half-smile.}

Far down, stranger?

TRAMP

A piece only.

{She fills the kettle and puts it on the fire.}

NORA

Maybe, if you're not easy afeard, you'd stay here a short while

alone with himself.

TRAMP

I would surely. A man that's dead can do no hurt.

NORA

{Speaking with a sort of constraint.}

I'm going a little back to the west, stranger, for himself would go there one night and another and whistle at that place, and then the young man you're after seeing -- a kind of a farmer has come up from the sea to live in a cottage beyond -- would walk round to see if there was a thing we'd have to be done, and I'm wanting him this night, the way he can go down into the glen when the sun goes up and tell the people that himself is dead.

TRAMP

{Looking at the body in the sheet.}

It's myself will go for him, lady of the house, and let you not be destroying yourself with the great rain.

NORA

You wouldn't find your way, stranger, for there's a small path only, and it running up between two sluigs where an ass and cart would be drowned. {She puts a shawl over her head.} Let you be making yourself easy, and saying a prayer for his soul, and it's not long I'll be coming again.

TRAMP

{Moving uneasily.}

Maybe if you'd a piece of a grey thread and a sharp needle -- there's great safety in a needle, lady of the house -- I'd be putting a little stitch here and there in my old coat, the time I'll be praying for his soul, and it going up naked to the saints of God.

NORA

{Takes a needle and thread from the front of her dress and gives it to him.}

There's the needle, stranger, and I'm thinking you won't be lonesome, and you used to the back hills, for isn't a dead man itself more company than to be sitting alone, and hearing the winds crying, and you not knowing on what thing your mind would stay?

TRAMP

{Slowly.}

It's true, surely, and the Lord have mercy on us all!

{Nora goes out. The Tramp begins stitching one of the tags in his coat, saying the "De Profundis" under his breath. In an instant the sheet is drawn slowly down, and Dan Burke looks out. The Tramp moves uneasily, then looks up, and springs to his feet with a movement of terror.}

DAN

{With a hoarse voice.}

Don't be afeard, stranger; a man that's dead can do no hurt.

TRAMP

{Trembling.}

I meant no harm, your honour; and won't you leave me easy to be saying a little prayer for your soul?

{A long whistle is heard outside.}

DAN

{Sitting up in his bed and speaking fiercely.}

Ah, the devil mend her. . . . Do you hear that, stranger? Did ever you hear another woman could whistle the like of that with two fingers in her mouth? {He looks at the table hurriedly.} I'm destroyed with the drouth, and let you bring me a drop quickly before herself will come back.

TRAMP

{Doubtfully.}

Is it not dead you are?

DAN

How would I be dead, and I as dry as a baked bone, stranger?

TRAMP

{Pouring out the whisky.}

What will herself say if she smells the stuff on you, for I'm thinking it's not for nothing you're letting on to be dead?

DAN

It is not, stranger, but she won't be coming near me at all, and it's not long now I'll be letting on, for I've a cramp in my back, and my hip's asleep on me, and there's been the devil's own fly itching my nose. It's near dead I was wanting to sneeze, and you blathering about the rain, and Darcy {bitterly} -- the devil choke him -- and the towering church. {Crying out impatiently.} Give me that whisky. Would you have herself come back before I taste a drop at all?

{Tramp gives him the glass.}

DAN

{After drinking.}

Go over now to that cupboard, and bring me a black stick you'll see in the west corner by the wall.

TRAMP

{Taking a stick from the cupboard}

Is it that?

DAN

It is, stranger; it's a long time I'm keeping that stick for I've a bad wife in the house.

TRAMP

{With a queer look.}

Is it herself, master of the house, and she a grand woman to talk?

DAN

It's herself, surely, it's a bad wife she is -- a bad wife for an old man, and I'm getting old, God help me, though I've an arm to me still. {He takes the stick in his hand.} Let you wait now a short while, and it's a great sight you'll see in this room in two hours or three. {He stops to listen.} Is that somebody above?

TRAMP

{Listening.}

There's a voice speaking on the path.

DAN

Put that stick here in the bed and smooth the sheet the way it was lying. {He covers himself up hastily.} Be falling to sleep now and don't let on you know anything, or I'll be having your life. I wouldn't have told you at all but it's destroyed with the drouth I was.

TRAMP

{Covering his head.}

Have no fear, master of the house. What is it I know of the like of you that I'd be saying a word or putting out my hand to stay you at all?

{He goes back to the fire, sits down on a stool with his back to the bed and goes on stitching his coat.}

DAN

{Under the sheet, querulously.}

Stranger.

TRAMP

{Quickly.}

Whisht, whisht. Be quiet I'm telling you, they're coming now at the door.

{Nora comes in with Micheal Dara, a tall, innocent young man behind her.}

NORA

I wasn't long at all, stranger, for I met himself on the path.

TRAMP

You were middling long, lady of the house.

NORA

There was no sign from himself?

TRAMP

No sign at all, lady of the house.

NORA

{To Micheal.}

Go over now and pull down the sheet, and look on himself, Micheal Dara, and you'll see it's the truth I'm telling you.

MICHEAL

I will not, Nora, I do be afeard of the dead.

{He sits down on a stool next the table facing the tramp. Nora puts the kettle on a lower hook of the pot hooks, and piles turf under it.}

NORA

{Turning to Tramp.}

Will you drink a sup of tea with myself and the young man, stranger, or {speaking more persuasively} will you go into the little room and stretch yourself a short while on the bed, I'm thinking it's destroyed you are walking the length of that way in the great rain.

TRAMP

Is it to go away and leave you, and you having a wake, lady of the house? I will not surely. {He takes a drink from his glass which he has beside him.} And it's none of your tea I'm asking either.

{He goes on stitching. Nora makes the tea.}

MICHEAL

{After looking at the tramp rather scornfully for a moment.}

That's a poor coat you have, God help you, and I'm thinking it's a poor tailor you are with it.

TRAMP

If it's a poor tailor I am, I'm thinking it's a poor herd does be running back and forward after a little handful of ewes the way I seen yourself running this day, young fellow, and you coming from the fair.

{Nora comes back to the table.}

NORA

{To Micheal in a low voice.}

Let you not mind him at all, Micheal Dara, he has a drop taken and it's soon he'll be falling asleep.

MICHEAL

It's no lie he's telling, I was destroyed surely. They were that wilful they were running off into one man's bit of oats, and another man's bit of hay, and tumbling into the red bogs till it's more like a pack of old goats than sheep they were. Mountain ewes is a queer breed, Nora Burke, and I'm not used to them at all.

NORA

{Settling the tea things.}

There's no one can drive a mountain ewe but the men do be reared in the Glen Malure, I've heard them say, and above by Rathvanna, and the Glen Imaal, men the like of Patch Darcy, God spare his soul, who would walk through five hundred sheep and miss one of them, and he not reckoning them at all.

MICHEAL

{Uneasily.}

Is it the man went queer in his head the year that's gone?

NORA

It is surely.

TRAMP

{Plaintively.}

That was a great man, young fellow, a great man I'm telling you. There was never a lamb from his own ewes he wouldn't know before it was marked, and he'd run from this to the city of Dublin and never catch for his breath.

NORA

{Turning round quickly.}

He was a great man surely, stranger, and isn't it a grand thing when you hear a living man saying a good word of a dead man, and he mad dying?

TRAMP

It's the truth I'm saying, God spare his soul.

{He puts the needle under the collar of his coat, and settles himself to sleep in the chimney-corner. Nora sits down at the table; their backs are turned to the bed.}

MICHEAL

{Looking at her with a queer look.}

I heard tell this day, Nora Burke, that it was on the path below Patch Darcy would be passing up and passing down, and I heard them say he'd never past it night or morning without speaking with yourself.

NORA

{In a low voice.}

It was no lie you heard, Micheal Dara.

MICHEAL

I'm thinking it's a power of men you're after knowing if it's in a lonesome place you live itself.

NORA

{Giving him his tea.}

It's in a lonesome place you do have to be talking with some one, and looking for some one, in the evening of the day, and if it's a power of men I'm after knowing they were fine men, for I was a hard child to please, and a hard girl to please {she looks at him a little sternly}, and it's a hard woman I am to please this day, Micheal Dara, and it's no lie I'm telling you.

MICHEAL

{Looking over to see that the tramp is asleep, and then pointing to the dead man.}

Was it a hard woman to please you were when you took himself for your man?

NORA

What way would I live and I an old woman if I didn't marry a man with a bit of a farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?

MICHEAL

{Considering.}

That's true, Nora, and maybe it's no fool you were, for there's good grazing on it, if it is a lonesome place, and I'm thinking it's a good sum he's left behind.

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NORA

{Taking the stocking with money from her pocket, and putting it on the table.}

I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was that time, Micheal Dara, for what good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain.

MICHEAL

{Looking at her uneasily.}

What is it ails you, this night, Nora Burke? I've heard tell it's the like of that talk you do hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills.

NORA

{Putting out the money on the table.}

It's a bad night, and a wild night, Micheal Dara, and isn't it a great while I am at the foot of the back hills, sitting up here boiling food for himself, and food for the brood sow, and baking a cake when the night falls? {She puts up the money, listlessly, in little piles on the table.} Isn't it a long while I am sitting here in the winter and the summer, and the fine spring, with the young growing behind me and the old passing, saying to myself one time, to look on Mary Brien who wasn't that height {holding out her hand}, and I a fine girl growing up, and there she is now with two children, and another coming on her in three months or four. {She pauses.}

MICHEAL

{Moving over three of the piles.}

That's three pounds we have now, Nora Burke.

NORA

{Continuing in the same voice.}

And saying to myself another time, to look on Peggy Cavanagh, who had the lightest hand at milking a cow that wouldn't be easy, or turning a cake, and there she is now walking round on the roads, or sitting in a dirty old house, with no teeth in her mouth, and no sense and no more hair than you'd see on a bit of a hill and they after burning the furze from it.

MICHEAL

That's five pounds and ten notes, a good sum, surely! . . . It's not that way you'll be talking when you marry a young man, Nora Burke, and they were saying in the fair my lambs were the best lambs, and I got a grand price, for I'm no fool now at making a bargain when my lambs are good.

NORA

What was it you got?

MICHEAL

Twenty pound for the lot, Nora Burke. . . . We'd do right to wait now till himself will be quiet awhile in the Seven Churches, and then you'll marry me in the chapel of Rathvanna, and I'll bring the sheep up on the bit of a hill you have on the back mountain, and we won't have anything we'd be afeard to let our minds on when the mist is down.

NORA

{Pouring him out some whisky.}

Why would I marry you, Mike Dara? You'll be getting old and I'll be getting old, and in a little while I'm telling you, you'll be sitting up in your bed -- the way himself was sitting -- with a shake in your face, and your teeth falling, and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping a gap.

{Dan Burke sits up noiselessly from under the sheet, with his hand to his face. His white hair is sticking out round his head.}

NORA

{Goes on slowly without hearing him.}

It's a pitiful thing to be getting old, but it's a queer thing surely. It's a queer thing to see an old man sitting up there in his bed with no teeth in him, and a rough word in his mouth, and his chin the way it would take the bark from the edge of an oak board you'd have building a door. . . . God forgive me, Micheal Dara, we'll all be getting old, but it's a queer thing surely.

MICHEAL

It's too lonesome you are from living a long time with an old man, Nora, and you're talking again like a herd that would be coming down from the thick mist {he puts his arm round her}, but it's a fine life you'll have now with a young man, a fine life surely. . . .

{Dan sneezes violently. Micheal tries to get to the door, but before he can do so, Dan jumps out of the bed in queer white clothes, with his stick in his hand, and goes over and puts his back against it.}

MICHEAL

Son of God deliver us.

{Crosses himself, and goes backward across the room.}

DAN

{Holding up his hand at him.}

Now you'll not marry her the time I'm rotting below in the Seven Churches, and you'll see the thing I'll give you will follow you on the back mountains when the wind is high.

MICHEAL

{To Nora.}

Get me out of it, Nora, for the love of God. He always did what you bid him, and I'm thinking he would do it now.

NORA

{Looking at the Tramp.}

Is it dead he is or living?

DAN

{Turning towards her.}

It's little you care if it's dead or living I am, but there'll be an end now of your fine times, and all the talk you have of young men and old men, and of the mist coming up or going down. {He opens the door.} You'll walk out now from that door, Nora Burke, and it's not to-morrow, or the next day, or any day of your life,

that you'll put in your foot through it again.

TRAMP

{Standing up.}

It's a hard thing you're saying for an old man, master of the house, and what would the like of her do if you put her out on the roads?

DAN

Let her walk round the like of Peggy Cavanagh below, and be begging money at the cross-road, or selling songs to the men. {To Nora.} Walk out now, Nora Burke, and it's soon you'll be getting old with that life, I'm telling you; it's soon your teeth'll be falling and your head'll be the like of a bush where sheep do be leaping a gap.

{He pauses: she looks round at Micheal.}

MICHEAL

{Timidly.}

There's a fine Union below in Rathdrum.

DAN

The like of her would never go there. . . . It's lonesome roads she'll be going and hiding herself away till the end will come, and they find her stretched like a dead sheep with the frost on her, or the big spiders, maybe, and they putting their webs on her, in the butt of a ditch.

NORA

{Angrily.}

What way will yourself be that day, Daniel Burke? What way will you be that day and you lying down a long while in your grave? For it's bad you are living, and it's bad you'll be when you're dead. {She looks at him a moment fiercely, then half turns away and speaks plaintively again.} Yet, if it is itself, Daniel Burke, who can help it at all, and let you be getting up into your bed, and not be taking your death with the wind blowing on you, and the rain with it, and you half in your skin.

DAN

It's proud and happy you'd be if I was getting my death the day I was shut of yourself. {Pointing to the door.} Let you walk out through that door, I'm telling you, and let you not be passing this way if it's hungry you are, or wanting a bed.

TRAMP

{Pointing to Micheal.}

Maybe himself would take her.

NORA

What would he do with me now?

TRAMP

Give you the half of a dry bed, and good food in your mouth.

DAN

Is it a fool you think him, stranger, or is it a fool you were born yourself? Let her walk out of that door, and let you go along with her, stranger -- if it's raining itself -- for it's too much talk you have surely.

TRAMP

{Going over to Nora.}

We'll be going now, lady of the house -- the rain is falling, but the air is kind and maybe it'll be a grand morning by the grace of God.

NORA

What good is a grand morning when I'm destroyed surely, and I going out to get my death walking the roads?

TRAMP

You'll not be getting your death with myself, lady of the house, and I knowing all the ways a man can put food in his mouth. . . .

We'll be going now, I'm telling you, and the time you'll be feeling the cold, and the frost, and the great rain, and the sun again, and the south wind blowing in the glens, you'll not be sitting up on a wet ditch, the way you're after sitting in the place, making yourself old with looking on each day, and it passing you by. You'll be saying one time, "It's a grand evening, by the grace of God," and another time, "It's a wild night, God help us, but it'll pass surely." You'll be saying--

DAN

{Goes over to them crying out impatiently.}

Go out of that door, I'm telling you, and do your blathering below in the glen.

{Nora gathers a few things into her shawl.}

TRAMP

{At the door.}

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear.

NORA

I'm thinking it's myself will be wheezing that time with lying down under the Heavens when the night is cold; but you've a fine

bit of talk, stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go.

{She goes towards the door, then turns to Dan.} You think it's a grand thing you're after doing with your letting on to be dead, but what is it at all? What way would a woman live in a lonesome place the like of this place, and she not making a talk with the men passing? And what way will yourself live from this day, with none to care for you? What is it you'll have now but a black life, Daniel Burke, and it's not long I'm telling you, till you'll be lying again under that sheet, and you dead surely.

{She goes out with the Tramp. Micheal is slinking after them, but Dan stops him.}

DAN

Sit down now and take a little taste of the stuff, Micheal Dara. There's a great drouth on me, and the night is young.

MICHEAL

{Coming back to the table.}

And it's very dry I am, surely, with the fear of death you put on me, and I after driving mountain ewes since the turn of the day.

DAN

{Throwing away his stick.}

I was thinking to strike you, Micheal Dara, but you're a quiet man, God help you, and I don't mind you at all.

{He pours out two glasses of whisky, and gives one to Micheal.}

DAN

Your good health, Micheal Dara.

MICHEAL

God reward you, Daniel Burke, and may you have a long life, and a quiet life, and good health with it.

{They drink.}

CURTAIN.

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